柳実冬貴
8.白銀争乱
対魔導学園
35試験小隊
AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"
ファンタジア文庫

AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon" 対魔導学園35試験小隊

Volume – 8 - Silvery Uprising - The White Escape

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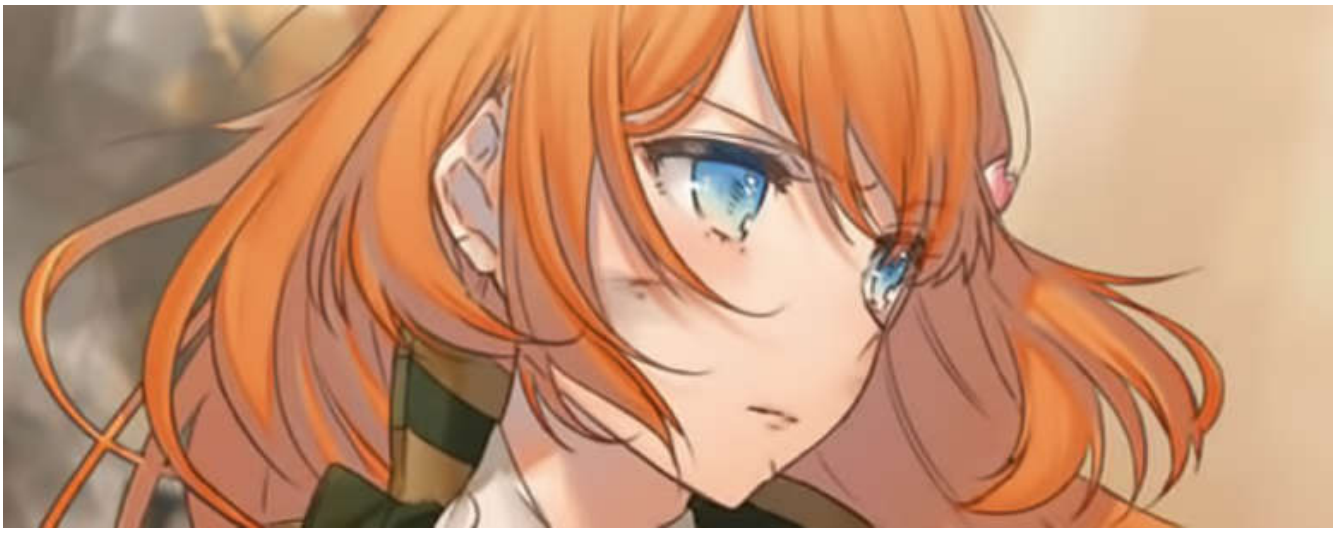

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AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"

対魔導学園35試験小隊

8.白銀争乱

8.The White Escape

After leaving the old Gunma and entering old Niigata, the 35th platoon has earnestly headed for north, but——

"Been a while since you last met right? She wanted to meet you so she'll definitely be happy〜."
Magnolia moved her hand away from her chest and showed off her skin to Takeru.
Judging by the colour there was an old wound in there making him want to look away, but seeing what was in the centre, Takeru felt a buzz inside of his chest.

Prologue

A few days after Elizabeth was killed by Mistilteinn's contractor, in the European Shelter's Magical Academy there was an emergency meeting performed in the parliament building's dark room between East Side and West Side.

"All responsibility lies on the East Side! You were supposed to monitor Mistilteinn and its contractor, preventing them from escaping! How are you going to make up for that?!"

The one exploding with anger face-to-face against Mother Goose was one of West Side's executives.

There was a total of twenty West Side's executives, almost all of them glared at Mother Goose.

On the other hand, the only executives of East Side were Mother Goose and Orochi. It might be different in other shelters, but East Side in the European Shelter was weak. Moreover, after a series of turmoils East was forced into an even more dangerous position.

Mother sat down with a calm and cool expression, and Orochi threw his legs on top of the desk and picked his ears.

That attitude fueled the West bunch's anger even further.

"We're here to do your process confidentially and with consideration, and what's with your attitude here! We gathered here despite it being a bother and we were busy...!"

When the man said so 'that's right that's right!' the other West Side's executives raised their voices as well.

Since it suddenly became noisy, Orochi hit the desk with his leg with abandon.

Not only being instructor of Double-Edged style, Orochi who had vampire cells transplanted into his body did a heel drop onto the desk and easily broke it in half.

Then he stared coldly at the mob in front of him.

"The ones who should be having a process is you... Elizabeth abused her private army and arbitrarily invaded the outside. It's you bastards who're in a poor position, ain't that right?"

"...you fool...!"

"In the first place, if that old hag didn't assault Mistilteinn, this wouldn't have happened."

"...there's no evidence of that yet! Don't speak as if you know that!"

"If you investigate the magical property on the Colosseum construction site you'll find out what was used immediately. The thing about Ancient Wizards is that if they do a crime, they'll be found

out after using a single spell. Even more so if it's "Almighty", even if you search the entire world you won't find anyone with it other than Eliza."

When the bunch of executives fell silent, Orochi's mouth arced.

"Even if you're in a rush to hide it, it's futile. We have already harvested soil samples in the epicenter. When the test results come, there'll be no way for you to win."

"...!!"

"Ya won't be able to push all the responsibility on Eliza alone. On the other hand, you West Side executives can't say that you knew nothing of the plan. You didn't think Eliza would die, right? What a shame, the "Godslayer" was better than her."

As Orochi chuckled, the executives stood up, shouting and gritting their teeth.

"...you bastards, you knew it'll turn out like that from the beginning...!"

The East Side had dealt with the turmoil this time way too quickly. It was as if they had anticipated in advance it would happen, and were already moving ahead of West Side.

In fact, there weren't many executives who knew of Eliza's actions and among those who knew, there were those who tried to stop her atrocities. Even so, if Eliza's atrocities were to be exposed, the executives couldn't talk their way out of it. Just as Orochi said, they wouldn't be let off even if they didn't know.

Looking at Orochi's bright smile, they realized.

This is a blackmail. Orochi and Mother Goose used Eliza's going out of control in order to take full control of the Magic Academy from the very beginning.

"...please do not worry. We have no intention of reporting you West Side's blunder to the senate. Elizabeth's death will be treated as an assassination done by dissidents."

Mother who was keeping silent opened her eyes.

"In exchange, from now on you will not interfere with our activities. Keep your mouth shut and do not make your move until things calm down."

If you don't want to take responsibility, you are to keep quiet.

Mother's request was very simple.

"...you say we're to stay quiet! What's your goal?! Mother Goose... "White Witch of the East"...! What on earth are you?!"

When an executive shouted in anger, Mother narrowed her eyes in response to his question. Even in the darkness her eyes were beautiful. Feeling an inhumanly mighty presence, the feet of the executives were struck by a pressure and they were unable to move.

The West Side has been investigating Mother Goose's past for a long time. When and where was she born, how did she grow up and how did she raise to her current position. They investigated it in a rush.

However, there was practically no information regarding her. What was known, was that she suddenly appeared out of nowhere during Witch Hunt War, then she fought the Inquisition beside Elizabeth, Orochi and Haunted.

Other than that, nothing was known. This unidentified existence lingered eerily at the very core of Valhalla. From the complete darkness, she stared at them like a beast making the West Side feel she is different from a human.

The witch called Mother Goose was completely shrouded in secrecy.

"Our goal is to stop the war between witches and humanity from happening again. I won't lie about that."

The darkness Mother Goose was wrapped in grew darker, and her shining-red pupils shimmered.

"However, we won't tell you not to go to war. Our enemies aren't those whom you call Empties."

At the same time as Mother rose up, Orochi put a hand on the sword by his waist.

In response to the executives' questioning gaze, Mother said.

"The one we are warring against——is Ootori Sougetsu alone."

Leaving just that, as if dissolving in the darkness Mother and Orochi disappeared from the parliament seats.

Three days after the West Side had been threatened by Mother Goose, AntiMagic Academy's Chairman's room.

"——Peace talks?"

Ootori Sougetsu entrusted his weight on the chair's back deeply and spoke a question to the handset.

The other party was Mother Goose.

《"Yes. The Border's invasion by the Pureblood Party was something done arbitrarily by one person. Please do not think it's something done with the consensus of us witches. To resolve the misunderstanding, I would like to meet face-to-face."》

"...do you mind if we carry it out through formal procedures?"

As if reading it out in monotone voice, Sougetsu asked indifferently.

《"...no, I would like for this meeting to remain secret."》

Hearing Mother's answer, Sougetsu laughed loudly.

"You've got guts there! You're doing pretty well in the role of East Side's executive spitting out pretty words like poison and trying to impose your requests here, Gungnir. Or maybe I should call you 'Goddess'?"

When Sougetsu asked, Mother paused for a moment and answered indifferently.

《"...do as you please."》

Sougetsu didn't miss the anger that could be heard from these words.

He tapped the desk with his fingers and suppressed his laughter.

"There's no use putting up a façade in front of me. For a while now you haven't contacted me and I wondered what's going on but... peace talks huh. Instead of covering it up as that crap, simply say "come out alone let's slaughter each other"."

《"Unlike you, I at the very least try to adapt to this world. My clumsy self loves this world. That's why I'm looking for a method whereas I do not have to fight against you."》

Sougetsu squinted and snorted in response to Mother's words.

"You're adapting you say? Hearing that from the main culprit makes me laugh. Did you forget that the reason for this plight and chaos is that you have waged a war on us?"

《"Rather than of the previous world, I'm speaking of the world we're currently in. I just want to protect this world from you, that is all."》

"....."

《"You just want to destroy this world, right. Destroying magic means just that."》

In response to Mother Goose's sharp words, Sougetsu shook his head and sighed.

"Well, fine. I wanted to meet with you at least once and talk it out carefully. I'll join you in that farce. As for time and place, it's up to you."

《"Then, tomorrow at three o' clock in the afternoon, the location... is the last location we saw each other fine?"》

"...there huh... you have quite good taste too."

While laughing, Sougetsu snapped his fingers as if he remembered something.

"——Oh right, can you switch with Orochi-kun? He should be beside you, listening right?"

Hearing his request, Mother went silent.

After a while,

《".....what do you want, shithead."》

An extremely displeased voice full of murderous intent could be heard.

Sougetsu made a happy smile.

"Hello there, sorry for not being able to properly greet you last time. You're unexpectedly healthy. I didn't think that naughty brat from back then would grow so mature. You've even grown a beard, I was honestly surprised at how dignified you carried yourself."

《"Hurry up and get to the main point."》

In response to Orochi's frustration, Sougetsu made a distorted crescent smile.

"I've told you right? That boy... Kusanagi Takeru will definitely come back to me."

《"I don't know what'cha acting all triumphant about, I already know that much."》

"That so? I was sure you wouldn't want him to go through the same you did and would continue to shelter him in the inner world."

Go through the same. Sougetsu said those words to Orochi intending to provoke him.

But Orochi strongly warded it off.

《"——Don't underestimate Kusanagi. He descended of my blood. Be careful or he might just cut your head off. The Kusanagi clan won't go down while being utilized by you."》

"That's not convincing when heard from you, used by that woman. Orochi-kun, are you assisting Mother Goose knowing well what is she conspiring? Cooperating with her, is betraying this world. Don't you think I'm somewhat better since I try to return this world to how it was supposed to be?"

When Orochi fell silent, Sougetsu grinned.

"Even now it's not too late. You should come over to this side——"

《"——I'm fine as long as you die and Mikoto comes back."》

Despite being rejected by Orochi, Sougetsu was unfazed. His smile intact, he opened his eyes thinly.

"If he heard that... don't you think Kusanagi-kun would become your enemy?"

《"It doesn't matter. If he tries to get in my way, that's where our skills will clash."》

Changing into a wry smile, Sougetsu sighed.

"Can it be——that you want Kusanagi-kun to stop you?"

Abruptly, the call ended.

All that came from the speaker were inorganic, electronic sounds.

Sougetsu raised his hand to his mouth and laughed. It was just like laughter of a child bullying someone weaker than them. "Ihihihi", his throat twitched and his belly rocked strongly as he rested his back on the chair.

Seeing him like that, a single boy leaning with his back on the wall looked at him with amazed expression.

"Chairman... that's too much laughter there. You act like a vile adult, yet your reactions are like that of an evil brat."

The boy moved away from the wall and raised both of his hands, chewing on a gum he moved towards Sougetsu.

He was short, and his youthful looks made it seem as if he was a middle school student. With his light brown hair and androgynous features, he looked more like a student of AntiMagic Academy.

He was an EXE member, moreover, a vice-captain. His age was over twenty.

His name was Magnolia Scarlet.

No matter how one looked at it, it wasn't a man's name. In other words, it's not "he" but "her". Not "boy", nor "girl" but an adult woman.

"There's no way I won't laugh at this...! Although he discarded a lot of things compared to how he was back then, he's still weak to provocations. Pff, kufufu, he got off the phone immediately because I hit the bulls-eye! Did you hear that, Mag?!"

"Yes yes I get it, I heard it. Geez, what is this old man finding interesting in that..."

"Mag, you should learn to understand the pleasure of having others panic at what you say. Having these pill bugs on the palm of my hand strike a guts pose with a pale expressions has already turned into a hobby of mine."

"What's with that exemplification... I get it, you're a shitty bastard aren't ya..."

Narrowing her eyes, Magnolia made a gum balloon.

At the same time as it popped, Sougetsu stopped laughing.

Resting his chin on his arms, he erased any expressions.

"So, did you get a grasp on dissident's current status?"

Asked that, Magnolia shrugged.

"I just burned my hands. They have slipped a spy even among the Inquisition's inner circle... Oonogi Kanata whom we confirmed to be one of them went missing and is out of our grasp. Hoshijiro Nagaru whom we suspect to be the top has been witnessed on the Grey City's battlefield, but we have lost the sight of her. Kurogane Hayato is... pure white. His innocence is a sight to behold."

"As expected."

Seeing him convinced and smiling, Magnolia appealed dissatisfied, clicking her tongue.

"But well, thanks to disassembling brains of the suspicious guys, we've had some results. Most of them were falsely accused, but some of them were article genuine. Although, there weren't any of them who knew their home's location."

"...so they predicted that and didn't tell them huh. Interesting, what's the scale?"

His eyes shining with curiosity, Sougetsu leaned towards Magnolia.

"Honestly, can a collective this secretive really exist? That's my honest impression, their number is unknown, probably even Hojishiro doesn't have a full grasp on them. Those guys, they aren't just dissidents from Inquisition. Valhalla, Ethics Committee, West Side, East Side, authorized religious groups, unofficial religious groups, various magical criminal organizations... I've no idea about the overseas, but they must've slipped a few people in there as well, but heck, they have organizations that are at odds with each other cooperating. It's not unreasonable to get a grasp on their actual situation with this."

Seeing Magnolia raise her hands in a gesture of giving up, Sougetsu opened his eyes wide.

"Was that organization we can't even get a grasp at really gathered by that red-haired girl?"

"If she's the top, that's what it means. Whether they really have a base is the question though."

"Of course they have one."

Hearing his words cut in like guillotine, Magnolia shut up. The emotion dwelling inside of Sougetsu's pupils wasn't anger nor fear, it was joy.

"Probably, there isn't that many formal members of dissident group. There should be just a few of them. And the organizations that are at odds with each other are merely being used."

"And their objective?"

"They intend to start an 'invisible civil war' at the same time in the entire world by using those organizations. By making existing organizations collapse from the inside, their ultimate goal is to build an organization that would replace Inquisition and Valhalla... or rather, they want to take over those two organizations from the inside."

"...so they're a revolutionary army, huh. But if they're moving with that intention, wouldn't it be more efficient for them to act by the end of the war? Both Inquisition and Valhalla can afford it with their forces, didn't the war barely start?"

Sougetsu narrowed his eyes at Magnolia's question and gloated with a hand on his chin.

"...they know that it'll be too late by the end of this war."

He rotated on the chair happily and looked at the landscape outside the window.

"Honestly, I didn't think that girl would be this good. I thought she was quite interesting when I saw her take over the student council, but I didn't think she was such an interesting talent."

"So you let her free?"

"It was my miscalculation. I just mistook her for something else. After all, there's a lot of children who overdo it trying to rebel against the adults..."

With a happy expression, he took a big breath.

"Still, for that girl to be the same type as me... an unexpected irregular, interesting. There's finally some fun in this war."

Remaining turned with his back towards Magnolia, Sougetsu scooped up his hair.

"Valhalla is not a threat outside of the military force. The top priority opponents we should deal with is that dissident bunch. Possibly, they hold more information than Valhalla does."

"What shall I do?"

As Magnolia requested orders, Sougetsu snapped with his fingers.

"——You are to lead the EXE and chase the 35th test platoon. Hojishiro is together with them without doubt."

"How to treat her after capture?"

"No need to capture her. Crush her at full strength. That'll be my courtesy to her who's the same type as me."

"Roooger. Nice, I'm lovin' Chairman's orders, they're always so simple."

After receiving orders, Magnolia turned around on her heel and left the Chairman's room.

Left behind, Sougetsu indulged himself in emotions while looking at the school's scenery.

No one knows how much time has passed since Ootori Sougetsu has dominated the Inquisition, no one except for himself.

The time when the system called Inquisition was established dates back to middle ages.

Originally, Inquisition had been cracking down on the pagan religion. Although there are records of its beginnings as part of Catholic Church, right now, even the Catholic Church was branded as 『Magical』 and its concept was prohibited by law. The religions authorized by Inquisition in modern times were weak and vulnerable or fake.

There were only a few who knew his objective. The amount of people who knew his identity was only a handful.

And there were only a few people who were questioning this man of unknown age who reigned as the top of the world's largest organization.

In front of the sight that could be said to have been built by him alone, Sougetsu was intoxicated but didn't laugh, instead letting out a deep, deep sigh.

"So many years spent to get this far. It took much longer than expected."

He moved his gaze up, looking at the cloudless sky.

What filled his field of view gave him peace of mind, the smile Sougetsu made was also cloudless.

And he said,

"...it's a good day to break the world."

As if looking at the empty summer sky, he spilled that happily.

Chapter 1 - To the North

After escaping the fifth laboratory, the 35th platoon escaped towards the surface through an underpass, finally arriving at a road 20 kilometers away.

Takeru opened the entrance under the bridge and checked the situation outside.

There was an unpleasant silence. He'd rather if there were gunshots and screams.

No signs of people.

"...a'ight, looks fine."

He closed the door and checked up on his comrades' state.

Ouka and Ikaruga were still sleeping. Other than that, everyone had wounds all over their bodies, were covered with mud and sand.

Mari's and Usagi's expressions were stiff, it was easy to tell that they're uneasy as to what's awaiting everyone ahead.

The situation wasn't funny at all, but Takeru still laughed.

"You really look horrible."

Enticed by his laughter, Mari and Usagi laughed as well. Kanaria had a dissatisfied look for a while already, but she properly carried Ikaruga on her back.

Next, Takeru turned towards the student council president, Hojishiro Nagaru.

Nagaru nodded to him, and started to speak about the future plans.

"Now, we're going to head to our, dissident's home. There's an entrance in the north-east, so we have to move there."

"North-east... that's quite far, is it all right?"

When Mari asked anxiously, Nagaru made a carefree expression.

"I-i-it's a-all rightt."

" " " "Hey!" " " "

She spoke with a trembling voice completely different to what her expressions suggested, causing everyone to retort.

"I'm just joking〜. I have prepared a car properly. There are many speed checkpoints, ETC's and camera's which makes me anxious, but I know loopholes on the civilian roads. Well, let's go there comfortably〜〜."

"...why are you so optimistic?"

As Usagi asked, Nagaru opened her eyes thinly, put a hand on her hip and laughed in an indecent manner.

"Because even if we think of it we can't help it. It's better if you enjoy this situation. It's elopement you seee? Ain't it thrilling? Think of it as of a school trip."

Nagaru's lack of tension and boldness made Takeru feel she was similar to someone.

Somehow, in his head he saw this white-haired man laughing in a cat-like manner...

It wasn't like he didn't trust her, but he was weak against that type of people anyhow.

"Kusanagi-kun."

Suddenly, Nagaru called out to Takeru while placing her hand on the doorknob.

The light from the outside leaked in through the gap, giving her a backlight.

Nagaru slowly reached out to Takeru.

Seeing her expression, he changed his opinion of her.

They weren't alike. This person wasn't like that man.

When he was reminiscing, Nagaru's expression from back then brought Takeru relief.

"From now on, in exchange for fulfilling your promise I will return the favor. That's why, let's go ——we're starting the counter-offensive."

That is because she was different from that man who only thought of people as of pawns to use, she made an expression full of human emotions.

Takeru took her hand without hesitation.

However, six hours later.

"...mgrrrr."

With both of her hands placed on the steering wheel, Hojishiro Nagaru glared at the map and growled. Her car stopped by the end of the road and was being overtaken by the cars moving on the road.

Nagaru had remained in this posture for nearly 30 minutes already.

Takeru sat on the seat beside her and stared at her from the profile anxiously. Seeing her fold the map with a loud *flap*, he swallowed his saliva.

Sitting on the seat beside him, Nagaru made a warm smile.

"——Sorry, I lost my way!"

"Heyyy!"

He retorted with abandon to the conclusion Nagaru made after having them wait for a long time.

"Tahaha" Nagaru laughed and joined her hands in front of her, apologizing to Takeru and the small fry platoon's members in the rear seats.

"A-aww〜. 'Cause, see, if I use car navigation or mobile system, our position might be found out by Inquisition〜... I'm a child of the modern age and I can't read a normal map〜."

"Didn't you tell us you were accustomed to reading these because of your daily training?!"

When Takeru's questions cornered her, Nagaru pouted.

"Since it's come to this, you read it Kusanagi-kun〜, you're sitting on the passenger seat so it should be your work."

"I can't do anything aside from swordsmanship, in the first place——weren't you the one who told me to sit here!"

"Ahaha, don't puff up so much☆."

"!...〜〜You're super annoying...!"

Clenching his fist, Takeru did his best to endure the anger.

I really can't deal with this person.

The car Nagaru was driving was an eight-seater. Nagaru was in the driver's seat, Takeru was in the passenger seat in front. In the first row of rear seats was Ouka, and Mari. In the second row there was Kanaria, Usagi and Ikaruga.

Rather than uniforms, everyone was in plain clothes. Since the 35th platoon was wanted, they couldn't afford to wear AntiMagic Academy's or Magic Academy's uniforms.

Takeru was in jeans and a town jacket. Ouka wore boots, a high-necked sweater and a skirt. Mari had a duffle coat as well as a hat and a scarf of different colors. Usagi had a white pleated coat and a skirt. Ikaruga had a black T-coat and black jeans. Kanaria wore a jersey for the ease of move and ear pads to hide her ears.

And as for Nagaru, she wore a leather jacket, damaged jeans and large sunglasses.

On top of not suiting her, it was suspicious-looking. Seeing Takeru's expression cramp up, Nagaru moved the sunglasses on top of her head with a grimace.

"When you say 'disguise' it's obviously sunglasses."

"Rather, it looks so unbalanced it can be only used as a gag."

Hearing Takeru's honest impression Nagaru went "ehh!" with a shocked expression,

"Um... President, how about I drive instead?"

Ouka leaned from the rear seat, asking Takeru and Nagaru.

Although she was still out of it after waking up, perceiving a strange atmosphere she leaned forward and volunteered.

Her expression wasn't the usual gallant one, she looked dazed instead.

Not much time has passed since she realized her life's goal, revenge, so it was no wonder it was so.

"No can do Ouka-chann. For both driving and reading porn you need to be eighteen years old."

"Actually, I have acquired a special Inquisitor's privileged driver license."

"But, you've had too much tension and you're tired, rest a bit longer〜. Also, if a child drives a car in the open others will get suspicious〜."

You're the most childish looking in here so that's not really convincing, Takeru thought. However, there was some truth in there.

"Don't force yourself. Your back must still hurt right? Even if the wounds dealt by spirit silver are healed, it should hurt for a while after."

"That's... it's all right. After releasing the Vampire form, the damage from the spirit silver was suppressed. Vlad fixed me up so it's fine. I've had enough rest too, if I slack any more it'll have adverse effects. I think I'll be able to distract myself if I drive."

Ouka said so while combing her disheveled hair with one hand.

Seeing Ouka right after she wakes up was quite a rare. The gesture she made to fix her hair was strangely sexy, unnerving Takeru.

"? What is it?"

"N-nothing..."

Unable to withstand her stare, he turned away.

『"I don't want half. I want everything together with you."』

After being asked for that and answering her request, he was strangely conscious of it now.

As he tried to suppress his perverse feelings, suddenly an elbow hit him in the solar plexus.

Although it was fairly light, Takeru twisted for a moment.

When he lowered his gaze to his abdomen, he saw something clad in black cloth sit on top of his knees.

Sitting on his knees ever since they got on the car and now squirming restlessly,

"I'm sorry. It was just a reflex."

Murmuring, was Lapis.

The reason she was sitting on top of his knees, was because she specifically requested it.

Right now, Lapis was wearing a magic-sealing fabric, her entire body was clad in a black robe up to the top of her head. It was to not allow Inquisition to perceive her magical power. Although she had forcibly released the control Inquisition had over her when the God Hunting form was invoked, but since they had data on her magical power the possibility of her being detected was high.

For the same reason, Vlad was currently in a box for sealing Magical Heritages.

Unlike Lapis, Vlad was still under Sougetsu's management and thus he was completely sealed. According to what Nagaru said, there was a way to remove the control. Although it was unclear whether there really was such a method, they had no choice but to believe her at the moment.

"W-what is it all of a sudden... it hurt."

"My apologies. It's an error. I do not understand why have I taken such action."

After curtly saying that, Lapis rudely faced towards the window.

Ever since they left Magic Academy, Lapis started to act strange quite often. When he asked her what was the reason for that, she always responded with "It's an error". Come to think of it, when he was interacting with Ouka back when she said 'I want everything together', he felt a black aura from Lapis.

Could it be that she was jealous as his partner?

He thought that could be so, but it wasn't limited to just Lapis. Although she wanted to monopolize Takeru as his Magical Heritage, she should have been uninterested in his interpersonal relationships.

"Are you upset? What is it, if you don't say it I won't know."

Smiling wryly, Takeru ground his chin on the top of her head.

"...I said I do not know. Please don't grind on my head."

When he peeked into Lapis' face, he saw her puff up her cheeks while remaining expressionless.

I retract my previous statement. She is upset after all.

He smiled wryly once again, and then heard something like a growl come from the seat in the rear.

"Uu〜〜〜〜, uu〜〜〜uuu〜〜〜〜!"

It was Mari who sat next to Ouka.

Mari clung to Takeru's seat from behind and directed a jealous gaze towards the three.

"Why did you three progress your relationships where I can't see? Why am I set aside despite being with you the entire time? Where's my flag? Heyy, why?! Why won't you raise my flag, Takeru?!"

"Guohh! Y-you, don't strangle me from behind!"

"I said that you're going to get interrogated when we were escaping right?! Speak! What happened between you?!!"

"What are you saying during emergency——sto—dying, I'm dying!"

Strangled soundly from behind, Takeru's face turned blue. Lapis faced away, and Ouka watched his suffering in a daze.

Although the third row was awfully quiet, the car was very chaotic.

"You're so popular, Kusanagi-kun〜, Onei-san would like to join the lovecom〜. Let's have a competition〜!"

"You..hurry...up...and start...driving...!"

Retorting to Nagaru who care-freely watched, he rejected her. In the end, Ouka was the one who drove, and about ten minutes later the car started up once again.

After another hour, thanks to Ouka replacing the driver, the journey proceeded smoothly.

However, the last row with Kanaria, Usagi and Ikaruga was completely silent for nearly an hour.

The entire time, Kanaria looked outside with an elbow on the window and a grumpy expression.

Ikaruga was being herself, and although occasionally she looked towards Kanaria, she didn't call out to her.

And,

"...uuu..."

Without a doubt, the one who had it most difficult in this situation was Usagi.

It was awkward. Way too awkward.

Since she knew the two's circumstances, Usagi couldn't speak up. Ikaruga woke up soon after they left the underground passage.

『"...a nostalgic...scent."』

When she woke up, Ikaruga said so with her face in Kanaria's hair.

Surprised, Kanaria immediately let go of her hands, dropping Ikaruga on the ground.

Falling on her butt, Ikaruga looked up blankly at Kanaria.

Although Kanaria tried to shout something, her shoulders trembling in anger, Ikaruga placing a hand on her cheek made her unable to speak up.

"....."

It was the first time Usagi seen Ikaruga make such an expression.

As if she found a once lost treasure... regaining feelings once lost.

With such an expression, tears trickled down Ikaruga's face.

And as if not to let her go ever again, she gently held Kanaria's body.

She didn't say anything. All she did, was to gently embrace Kanaria.

Of course, Kanaria didn't let her remain like that and pushed Ikaruga away. After that, she continued to ignore Ikaruga.

——W-w-w-what to do?!

Being the go-between in this parent-child relationship was too heavy for her.

Rather, why this seating arrangement?! Why do I have to be sandwiched between them?! I will resent that Student Council President forever for this arrangement! My squishiness isn't enough to act as a cushion for those two! I should propose a seat change. Ootori who can't read the mood should be sitting here. Having someone who can read the mood here causes adverse effects instead!

When she noticed that Ouka had suddenly moved to the driver's seat, tears appeared in Usagi's eyes as she went "whaat〜". Then she stared towards the front passenger seat at Takeru, asking him for help.

And saw Lapis demurely sit on top of his knees.

Anger surged up inside her.

UUUuuuuu! I want to be there! I too want to sit on Kusanagi's lap! Why does that girl alone get special treatment?! Kusanagi too, why did he obediently give up his lap to herr. Why isn't it mee.

They're going deredere right under my nose! That philanderer! Rather than that skinny girl, it's obvious that I would be much more comfortable to hold——

"Kanaria."

When Ikaruga said a single word beside her, Usagi's jealousy-filled thoughts have frozen.

"There's so many things I would like to tell you... but I'm sorry, I can't say it well."

Conservatively, Ikaruga spoke in a calm tone of voice.

Still looking towards the window, Kanaria made an annoyed expression.

"Kana has nothing to talk with you about. Just stay silent."

"I can't do that. Until now, in order to meet you I have——"

"There was no need to for us to meet."

"...then why, have you come together with Kusanagi?"

"Shut up, it has nothing to do with you."

"It does. After all I'm your——"

Closing her eyes, Ikaruga looked for a word that would let her convey what she wanted to convey.

But before that, Kanaria's hair ruffled up and she said in a heavy tone of voice.

"Don't act like my mother...!"

These words were heavy enough to end the conversation.

Once again, a stagnant atmosphere has befallen the rear seat.

Usagi's shoulders twitched from tension, she looked towards Kanaria, then at Ikaruga.

Ikaruga narrowed her eyes and made a small sigh. She moved her line of sight outside of the window just like Kanaria did.

She was aloof as always.

Usagi didn't know what Ikaruga felt. She never became a mother herself. The feelings of Ikaruga who became a mother at her age were probably impossible to understand.

Seeing Ikaruga act as usual, Usagi felt like sighing.

How about making a slightly upset or dismayed expression at a time like this?

When Usagi thought so and tried to endure the silence, Usagi saw it.

Ikaruga's hand on top of the seat was slightly trembling.

.....

Usagi was the second one after Takeru who knows Ikaruga best.

She always acted like a grown-up and there was no way to get a grasp on her, but even she could be hurt.

The Ikaruga Usagi knew, was in fact more clumsy than Usagi herself. She was not good with displaying emotions of sadness and loneliness. Although it was unknown whether it was caused because of the environment she grew up in, Ikaruga never showed her sadness.

That's why, the only ones to notice it were those who knew her for a long time. Usagi stared at Ikaruga's trembling fingertips and finally understood the meaning behind this seat arrangement.

I see. I am the only one who can fulfill this role at the moment.

Without hesitation, Usagi grasped Ikaruga's trembling hand.

"....."

She squeezed her hand strongly.

Usagi couldn't say 'It's all right'. After all, it wasn't all right at all.

That's why, Usagi only held Ikaruga's hand in silence.

"Usagi."

Still looking outside, Ikaruga said with a quiet voice no one else could hear.

".....thank you."

Usagi clenched her lips, let out through her nose and nodded strongly just a single time.

Ikaruga moved closer to Usagi and leaned on her shoulder.

This is where I continue holding Ikaruga's hands in silence until we arrive at the destination.

While looking at the tumult on the front rows, Usagi swore to herself.

"...uka."

"....."

"Ouka, are you listening?"

"?! Takeru? What is it?"

It took him about a minute to call back the absent-minded Ouka who focused herself on driving.

Finally, Mari and Nagaru on the second row had quieted down, and Takeru called out to the dazed Ouka, but she didn't respond despite being called many times.

"I've called you over ten times and you wouldn't notice it at all."

"Is that so? Sorry, I'm concentrated on driving. I was driving a bike quite often, but it's been a while for me to drive a car."

She tried to appeal to him as not to make him worry, but Takeru's eyes weren't deceived.

"You're tired after all, aren't you? It's better if the driver changes..."

"I said I'm fine haven't I? Or is my driving rough? Am I drunk?"

"That's not it... ever since we left the underground passage, you've been worried about something..."

After fulfilling her revenge, it wouldn't be strange for her to lose sight of her purpose, but it didn't feel like that was the case.

Having a certain hunch, Ouka narrowed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'm not really worried nor I'm being depressed. It's just that I don't think it's over yet."

"...you mean Laugh Maker's case?"

When Takeru confirmed, Ouka made a small nod.

"I... believe that it's not over yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Laugh Maker... Mimulus Wallenstein told me "I escaped from Inquisition". Laugh Maker was once arrested by my father, Mineshiro Kazuma before. However, what happened nearly nine years ago, was her escaping during transportation and killing my family. Thinking hard upon it, it's strange... Laugh Maker had an A-class risk designation, they should have been very careful with her transportation."

If she was designated as A-class risk, she was supposed to be placed in an Iron Maiden. It was impossible for such a dangerous criminal to escape normally.

Moreover, Laugh Maker's actions were strange.

"...if she escaped, that means she must have had a collaborator...?"

"That's what it would mean. However, I looked for the information about the jailbreak in a frenzy and didn't find any detailed records of it."

Ouka cut her speech there and squinted sharply.

"What worries me about the jailbreak event, was that there was not a single victim among Inquisition during her jailbreak. A-class designation is for dangerous murderers. I can tell since I fought against her... it's impossible for her not to kill anyone during a jailbreak."

"...that's means..."

"*sqssh*, *Ouka strongly squeezed the handle.*"

"I think that Inquisition let her escape. I met father's acquaintance on the battlefield... from that person, I have heard that father was a nuisance to Inquisition. That's why, the possibility of Inquisition using Laugh Maker to kill my father and family is high."

Hearing what Ouka said, Takeru gasped.

He knew only one person who could have done that.

If it was that man, he would pull it off in order to conceal information.

"I have no proof. I'll have to investigate it one day."

"I'll help you. If that's true, I definitely won't forgive it."

"That's a great help... but it has to be postponed until everything is over."

He was surprised hearing her unexpected response.

Ouka smiled wryly towards the confused Takeru.

"My personal revenge is already over. I was able to finish it together with you. I don't want to act based on hatred any longer."

"...but."

"From now on, I intend to stand up against the enemy as a member of the 35th Test Platoon. I want to act in order to help my comrades and your little sister."

"....."

"My revenge is finished, Takeru."

Her expression as she said so, wasn't radiant.

The expression she had had emptiness, and felt like she carried a sin.

But the relief was certainly there. If that relief was something he granted to Ouka, then it was something to be proud of.

He could confirm that he shouldered the half of her burden.

"...I see."

Takeru smiled lightly and faced forward.

"Rather than mine, it's your turn now. Among the platoon members you're the one most uneasy, isn't that right?"

"....."

"Although you're acting cheerfully as not to make anyone anxious, you're worried about Kiseki. I can tell."

"...well, if I said I don't worry, I would be lying."

In fact, he would like to rush to where Kiseki is immediately and save her.

He had already learned Kiseki's whereabouts. According to Nagaru, she is imprisoned as an experimental object in Alchemist's first laboratory. It was unknown what kind of treatment is she receiving there. However, without a doubt she was suffering beyond imagination.

Alchemist's first laboratory should be guarded like a fortress on par with Inquisition's after they started conspiring together. It wasn't at the level of fifth laboratory. Mounting a surprise attack on first laboratory was no different from attacking Inquisition's headquarters.

With the amount of people they had, they would be annihilated without being able to do anything. Once they reach the dissident's home base, they'll have to gather forces.

"Your concerns are splendid, as a captain. Your nobility is far beyond mine, who was easily trapped by hatred and exposed comrades to danger."

"But." Adding that, Ouka's face was dyed red in embarrassment.

"...y-you can complain to me all you want. Um... when I said I want to do everything together, you agreed so... I too want to do something for you."

When she spoke in such manner, Takeru felt flustered.

"Somehow, you said something similar in the jail before. It feels like it happened long time ago ——"

He tried to talk about the past to deceive her, then suddenly, clothes on his chest were pulled.

Looking towards his knees, he saw Lapis look outside while pulling on his clothes.

Her eyes were opened unusually wide, the landscape was reflected in her glass-like pupils.

"What is it, Lapis?"

Even when he asked her, Lapis didn't react immediately.

Spitting white breath while looking into the distance, she grasped Takeru's clothes tightly.

".....snow."

White fluffy crystals were falling from the cloudy sky to the ground.

Fields and trees were dyed white, covered with snow.

"Woah, true. So we're in the north already... the view has suddenly changed."

He moved his head closer to Lapis and they enjoyed the sight outside together.

Even though it was February, winter wasn't over yet. Even though there is no longer any concept of a country, the island's administrative division of prefectures remains unchanged, they were divided and called with names like old Tokyo and old Kanagawa prefectures. The place they should be in now would be the old Gunma prefecture's north. In the past, people passed what used to be Mikuni mountains once and entered Niigata, the scenery changed into one covered with snow. However, this area became a battlefield during the war and some mountains were destroyed in the aftermath of a battle. Therefore, the snow clouds from over the Japanese Sea extended further since they weren't blocked by the mountains.

"Lapis, is it your first time seeing snow?"

"...yes, probably, but I can't tell with certainty. For some reason I feel like I saw a similar landscape before."

It wouldn't be strange if she did. The battlefield Lapis traversed along with her previous contractor, Kusanagi Mikoto, might have been in this area.

Embracing some kind of emotion, Lapis stared at the snowy landscape.

"...do you like snow?"

In response to Takeru's question, Lapis squinted.

"...I don't know, it's an error."

Along with her quiet voice, strength entered the hands grasping his clothes.

That gesture was somehow similar to that of a child, seeing a scary dream.

Sitting in the second row, Nagaru stuffed herself with potato chips contentedly and listened to the conversation in front and the back.

It was as if the conversations in front and the back rows were progressing as she intended them to, and she was pleased with it.

"...this guy, he's always flirting whenever and wherever."

Nagaru held out potato chips towards Mari who crossed her legs to the side and complained.

Mari casually grasped the potato chips, threw some in her mouth and started to chew them.

"It's the first time I'm speaking to you properly. It might be rude, but is watching people move as you want them to so much fun?"

She said so while looking at Nagaru.

Nagaru licked the salt from the potato chips attached to her finger and blinked with a blank look.

Mari moved closer to Nagaru as not to let the front or the rear hear, and continued in a small voice.

"The seating arrangements, you set up them so that comrades can follow up on each other, right?"

"Ohh, how sharp〜. That's right. Kusanagi-kun and Ouka-chan both have straight personalities, but they understand each other so they fit. Suginami-chan and Kanaria-chan have a problem others can't help with, but Usagi-chan should be able to support Ikaruga-chan at the very least."

"...what's that, am I excluded?"

"No, no, you can tell the mood the best in the platoon right? Even in a situation like this where your love rival Ouka-chan is rapidly getting closer to Kusanagi-kun, you have taken content of the conversation into consideration and didn't intervene. Women are very jealous creatures so that's quite something〜."

Being patted on the shoulder repeatedly, Mari clicked her tongue.

"You have a similar smell to that of Inquisition's chairman. A smell of someone whose hobby is to treat people like chess pieces as they play."

"Wow, what an unexpectedly straight girl."

Despite the exaggerated reaction, Nagaru was having fun.

"I don't know whether I'm similar to that white-haired ghost, but certainly, I'm happy to see people move as I want them to. And yet, seeing people go in a direction I think is right makes me even more happy."

"....."

"Ever since I was born I had a mental defect. Even as my family and friends died, I didn't feel any sadness. Even as the student council members were wiped out, all I could think was 'how unfortunate' or 'what a waste〜', but there was no sadness."

Nagaru said so indifferently, as if it was nothing.

For Mari, it was the first time to hearing it. When she looked at Nagaru from the side profile, she saw her laughing and it didn't feel like there was any defect.

"But, it's not like I can't understand the sadness or suffering of others. It's just that I cannot sympathize with them."

As despair surrounded her, she alone remained happy.

Even if she understood the reason for the despair in her surroundings, she would never feel the same.

I can only imagine it, but it must be incredibly lonely, Mari thought.

"Since I cannot sympathize with the suffering or sadness of others, I have no choice but to make those people who're filled with negative feelings happy. This world is full of things I cannot sympathize with, so unless I make them happy I'll feel lonely. I don't understand loneliness, but having others feel the same as I do seems interesting."

After being told that, Mari somehow understood.

"And as I did so and others became happy, it became very entertaining for me. Seeing people act as I intended them to and end up with a smile has become unbearably fun for me. As I continued to use that as my reason for living, before I realized I became a person like this."

Seeing Nagaru's laughter, Mari narrowed her eyes.

"Soo, what? Are you saying that you're trying to help just for your self-satisfaction?"

"Mm〜, I'm standing as the dissidents' top so it's not all for self-satisfaction, about a third of it is I guess."

".....what's the dissidents' objective?"

"I'll explain that after we reach our home〜."

.....how annoying.

The person called Hojishiro Nagaru didn't seem to have come to help the 35th platoon out of good intentions and in good faith, and not necessarily as the dissidents' top.

Self-satisfaction. Everything for the sake of satisfying her own greed... making everyone happy, starting a revolution in order to make a happy world.

Such a thing, Mari snorted.

If it was only to sympathize with others, and she was really acting accordingly to her ego, then there was no reason for her to manage the dissidents. The dissidents were by no means a loose organization. They were a bunch that wanted to change this bloody world.

And the main problem was that they didn't know what their objective was.

Inquisition would destroy magic, creating a world in which people can live in peace.

Valhalla would spread magic, the witches would make a world of freedom and equality.

And the dissidents?

Just what on earth is this woman and the other dissidents aiming for.

"Snacks～ snacks～♪ snacks～ at 3'o clock～ snacks～ are the best♪."

Nagaru herself was acting carefree, sniffing the sweets she had in her backpack.

"Here, Mari-chan's share."

"....."

"It's okay～. They aren't poisoned or anything～♪."

She handed chocolates to Mari. She had her eyes thinly opened and her actions seemed forced.

Despite being suspicious, Mari took the chocolates immediately. They made a nice crunchy sound.

"I think it's natural for you to want to know our objective. In fact, I know that you're the most cautious one among your platoon's members."

"So you're saying I don't fit in. Well, that's true though."

"No no, the platoon needs a girl like you. But that's why, I want to talk about our organization after we reach our home."

Mari frowned at Nagaru's stubborn attitude whereas she won't reveal the truth no matter what.

"——Probably, it'll be too crazy for you to realize it's real."

Nagaru spilled that absent-mindedly, while watching the snow outside of the window.

"——Yahoo♪ My my it's the two of you, where are you going now?"

European Shelter, Magic Academy's East Side. Haunted appeared from the darkness near the spot Mother and Orochi tried to use transfer magic to head for the peace talks.

This man has always appeared abruptly and disturbed the situation.

Neither Mother nor Orochi were surprised. However, Orochi already grasped the sword on the verge of Haunted appearing.

Haunted flaunted a radiant smile and moved closer to the two with sound footsteps.

"...what do you want, pervert."

"I don't remember calling you. Could you disappear? You're dirtying the air."

In response to the two's heartless words, Haunted shrugged exaggeratedly.

"Even if you handle me in such a crude manner all of a sudden, I'm already used to it and won't get excited at all. On the other hand, since I changed sides to East Side, I thought it would be nice to deepen our camaraderie. Look, after all, we were comrades in arms in the previous war."

As Haunted pouted and started fidgeting, Orochi made a genuinely irritated expression.

"Changing sides...? In the first place, you've no intention of obeying anyone. Rather, if you're with us, obviously everything will be ruined. It was the same during the Witch Hunt War. You're a bother so get lost."

As Orochi waved his arms to shoo him away, Haunted made a dissatisfied pout. Although their exchange made it seem as if they were on good terms, their eyes weren't laughing. It would be correct to call them incompatible.

"As expected of someone with whom I have had such a long relationship, you know me well. Certainly, East Side can eat shit for all I care, yours and Mother's hypocrisy is so disgusting it looks lovely to me instead. I'm getting goosebumps at the thought of you becoming my allies."

"Oh-hoh, same here."

"But however, but however! But however, just this time I think it would be better if we went together just this once. I might not be your ally, but without a doubt Ootori Sougetsu is my enemy."

**tch* **tch* **tch*, Haunted waved his index finger and said such a thing with an annoying expression.

"What that man is seeking is destruction, right? That's inconsistent with the despair I seek. If everything is destroyed, there will be no despair. Listen, despair only stands out when there's happiness in the world, making a world without happiness despair is boring! If despair becomes routine, it'll become worthless! That man who wants to destroy this balance is without a doubt my enemy, or rather, a nuisance and obstacle——you're going for peace talks right, I'll go with you. Rather, it's an event that won't start without me, isn't it?"

Haunted made a fervent speech, and at the end he smiled pleasantly and concluded with "take me with you".

Shady. Definitely shady.

Still, the two knew what Haunted said was not a lie.

However, honestly it was "it's not a reason to take you with us".

Orochi squinted and started the transfer device. As the sound of magical power charging echoed, Haunted smoothly slid into the transfer device, entering between the two.

Seeing Haunted smile with satisfaction, Orochi spat out a huge sigh.

"Irritating... annoying... annoying... Gungnir, can I kill this guy?"

"I don't mind, but you'll just exhaust yourself. He's extremely difficult to kill, Host should know that he's the most troublesome existence in the world once it comes down to fighting. Above all, removal of the highest priority target is more important. Knowing that, do as you please."

"Ah, so you won't help me..."

"Yes. I refuse."

Orochi with a genuinely disgusted expression, and expressionless Mother.

Haunted spread his arms exaggeratedly and placed his hands on the two's shoulder in an over-familiar manner.

"Haa〜 how nostalgic. Back then when we were 150 years younger, us two men vying for one woman! Heart-rending love triangle! Our sweet and sour youth revives!"

"You didn't age at all since then, and we never had such a relationship!"

"Host, you will only tire yourself out with him. Ignoring him is most efficient. Good grief... why did Nacht choose such a man I wonder... I still can't understand that."

Their bodies began to emit light, and the moment magical power was released, the three's bodies suddenly disappeared from the spot.

Chapter 2 - A-Class danger (Estimated) Illegal Lodging "Fuji's Inn"

After leaving old Gunma and entering old Niigata, the 35th platoon earnestly headed north, however they started struggling with an unexpected amount of snow falling.

It would be fine if they chose a relatively popular road, but the minor roads didn't have a good snow-melting system and they were unable to proceed without studless tires and chains.

At this rate, their car would end up stuck. When Ouka suggested that they should hide somewhere until snow ceases to fall, Nagaru said "I know a good place to hide.".

Following Nagaru's suggestion, they headed to the place specified on the map.

The location was a secluded mountain, although there were houses scattered around, it was horrifyingly depopulated.

When they arrived, what was waiting for them was a private house that seemed like it was decaying.

There was a very plain sign by the entrance of the house.

『Fuji Inn』——Hot springs inside.

Nagaru left the car saying "I'll go negotiate!" and hurriedly entered the house. Meanwhile, the snow continued to fall and the platoon members stared at the house agape.

"This, no matter how you look at it, it's a hostel."

"It is a hostel."

"I saw something like this before... in pre-war documents."

"It's the season, but there's no ski resorts here, making it unnatural for it to be here."

"...it's crumbling."

Each of them anxiously stated their impressions.

"There's no way, but can it be that we're to spend night here..."

At the same time as Ouka's face cramped up, Nagaru came outside with a fast pace.

And, with a huge dazed smile, she made a big circle with her arms.

"They say it's okayy〜! We can stay〜!"

Ouka trod quickly through the snow and shook Nagaru's shoulders.

"Are you retarded?!"

"Ehh?! Whyy?!"

"You want us to stay in this inn during such an emergency?! Did you even consider the possibility we might get caught?! We're fugitives you know?!"

In response to Ouka's logical arguments, Nagaru joined the fingertips of both of her hands and pouted.

She fidgeted looking up from below at Ouka.

"'Cause, it's cold and sitting in the car would be difficult... don't you want to enter hot springs?"

"We're not here for a trip! From the very beginning we had no intention of spending the night! Since we're running away, it's natural for us to move through the night to the home base! Inquisition's pursuers might be approaching us right now you know?!"

"It's all right〜. They can't really look for us in this snow, I'm very familiar with this inn."

Nagaru started to explain the circumstances.

"When I became Student Council President I came here sometimes to obtain information about Magical Heritage to earn points. There are rumors of this hot spring's incredible effects. It's supposed to heal illnesses, injuries and other physical conditions. Mysterious, right〜?"

As if chatting, Nagaru continued.

"And then, I came to investigate! There's a Magical Heritage at the source of the spring〜! Normally I would take the Magical Heritage and arrest the landlady but..."

Raising her index finger, Nagaru laughed nonchalantly.

"It was a really good hot spring, moreover it was completely harmless, according to the landlady it was installed about seven generations before and I had no heart to rob this poor, deserted village of this little enjoyment."

"...and?"

"And, under the condition of overlooking it, they let me stay here for free〜."

——Ouka once again shook Nagaru's shoulders strongly.

"That's what they call bribery!"

"Ahaha, Ouka-chan, I'm not a regular Inquisitor, I have a splendid history as a criminal now. By the way, you're the same so let's not dig into small details."

"But that's not what AntiMagic Academy's student council president should do right?!"

Despite being a problem child, Ouka was a professional witch hunter and was unable to let off Nagaru's conduct with simple "ehh is that so".

However, the only one furious was Ouka, the other members didn't mind it.

As cold had taken hold of their bodies, they walked in droves up the stairs to the inn's door.

"It's so cold that I don't care. It's a fact that we're tired, hot springs hot springs♪."

"At this rate we'll turn into snowmen. Ah, but what about weapons?"

"Let's just leave it in the car, no point getting cold feet."

"Nice smell... Mari, in here, can we eat something? Can we eat?"

Seeing the platoon members line up in a carefree manner, Ouka was dismayed.

"Y-you all! Why are you riding on the flow like usual in this situation?! Now it's not time to do th——"

She wanted to restrain them, but everyone quickly entered the inn.

Takeru placed a hand on Ouka's shoulder.

"In the end, unless the snow stops falling we won't be able to proceed anyway, let's take it slow here."

"Y-you too Takeru... b-but..."

"I'm happy that you're trying to hurry it for my sake, but everyone's tired. You too, over the last month you haven't slept properly, am I right? You have dark circles under your eyes."

In response to Takeru's caring words, Ouka rubbed her eyes to deceive him.

He pat her shoulder twice.

"Just for today, let's soak in the hot springs and eat to recharge our energy."

"...if you say so."

While scratching her head, Ouka headed towards the front door after everyone.

"....."

After seeing everyone off from behind, Takeru let out a deep breath.

And he clenched his fist as if to withstand something.

It wasn't anger nor irritation.

From the depths of his stomach came a feeling similar to impatience.

The fact that even now Kiseki was suffering, was hurrying Takeru to an unpleasant degree.

"Kusanagi-kun's really splendid〜."

Unexpectedly, Nagaru called out to him from behind.

The instant he turned around, she stretched and patted his head.

He opened his eyes widely at this surprise attack. Although he patted other people's heads often, hardly ever was it done to him. Rather, it might have been the first time.

Smiling, Nagaru removed her hand from his head and looked gently towards Takeru.

Somehow, he got very embarrassed and his gaze wandered suspiciously.

"Despite what you said to Ouka-chan, you're the one who needs rest the most, don't overdo it."

"I-I'm all right. I slept a lot in Magic Academy. I'm the one with the most strength left over."

Nagaru shook her head.

"It's not physical strength, but your mind's problem. You're disturbed by your little sister's case right?"

"...that's true, but even if we hurry we can't do anything at the moment."

"Kusanagi-kun."

She erased the smile and stared at Takeru with a serious expression.

Takeru tensed up and stood upright, but Nagaru immediately changed her expression.

"You might rely on others, but that's not enough. You should learn how to let others spoil you. If you don't, one day you'll break."

"...spoil me?"

How is it different from relying on others, Takeru wondered.

As he stood there puzzled, Nagaru sighed and made a wry smile.

"Haa, it can't be helped... actually, I wanted Ouka-chan or Suginami-chan to play this role, but those girls have their own difficulties, really, can't be helped〜. Listen, Kusanagi-kun, being spoiled means——"

"?! Wai..."

"——Something like this."

Suddenly, Nagaru wrapped Takeru's head with both of her hands and pulled him to her chest.

Her chest had a soft and sweet scent.

Feeling a faint bulge on his cheek, Takeru stiffened.

"Aha, forgive me for not having any breasts〜."

"P-Presidentt?!"

"It's fine〜, be silent and let yourself be cuddled to Onei-san's chest."

While saying so, Nagaru gently stroked his head.

Unable to make any move, Takeru let her do as she pleased.

"You did well. Yes... good boy... you did your best. It was hard wasn't it. It's all right, there's no need to act strong any more."

"....."

"I'll definitely protect the promise I made to you. Will it be simple? It won't, but thanks to the means you have brought back, we can properly save Kiseki-chan."

"....."

"There are preparations undergoing... rest easy."

As she spoke to his ears with a sweet voice, Takeru was filled with embarrassment.

To think of it, he was encouraged before, but was he ever embraced? Was he ever comforted by anyone?

Perhaps because he always continued to tense up, tears spilled from Takeru's eyes.

Nagaru laughed cheerfully like she always did.

"So you collapse even with someone like me comforting you. I get it, rest properly for today. You've been doing your best the entire time, so God will forgive that much. And even if God doesn't forgive it, I will."

Although it took only a minute, a significant amount of the burden Takeru felt in his heart has dispersed.

Just when he was about to close his eyes because of the comfortable feeling, Takeru suddenly separated from Nagaru in a hurry.

"Ah, mm...! S-sorry for getting distracted!"

Takeru lowered his head while wiping off the tears from his eyes.

Nagaru shook her hand and made a complacent smile.

"No problem〜. Even so, spoiled Kusanagi-kun has quite the destructive power〜. My maternal instinct went "kyun kyun"〜."

"No...umm..."

"I wonder if Ouka-chan and the others will be angry if I give you a kiss on the forehead〜 and so on I wondered as I lost control〜."

She placed both hands on her cheeks and twisted her body back and forth.

Being told he's spoiled, Takeru blushed like never before. For a long time now he knew he's weak to older girls, but he didn't think he would get that disturbed with a hug from a girl just one year older than him. It was even more embarrassing, considering that Nagaru's appearance was very young, like that of an elementary schooler.

Seeing Takeru restless, Nagaru grinned.

"Can it be that you fell for me?"

"Ha?!"

"I see〜. So Kusanagi-kun is weak against adult charm〜. I wonder if this means I should enter the competition for Kusanagi-kun〜."

"Gufufu" Nagaru placed a hand on her mouth and laughed in an indecent manner, she was already back to her usual tone of voice.

He really was unable to get a grasp on her real self.

When she started to tease him, Takeru tried to retort to her like he usually did, but then,

"——Host."

Lapis clad in a black hood stood in the inn's entrance and called Takeru.

Her face wasn't visible, obstructed by the hood's shade.

"...you'll catch a cold. Let's hurry and enter."

"S-sorry. So you waited for me."

Treading on the snow, he ran up to Lapis in a hurry.

When he moved beside her, she lightly grasped the sleeve of Takeru's jacket.

"What is it?"

".....no."

Dodging the question, Lapis denied ambiguously.

She grasped his sleeve and stood there for a moment. However, soon enough she faced forward and pulling on Takeru's sleeve she entered the inn.

Takeru had an uncomfortable feeling, but didn't really worry about it and opened the inn's entrance door.

When Takeru and Lapis went into the inn, Nagaru stared at Lapis.

Lapis pulled on Takeru's clothes, as if to attract him to her as they walked.

"....."

Takeru probably hasn't noticed, but Nagaru did.

Just before Takeru started walking, Lapis glared at her from under the black hood.

Nagaru shook off the thin layer of snow on her body and warmed her hands with her breath.

"...looks like that girl is a bit dangerous after all."

What to do, she muttered, then followed Takeru and the others into the inn.

It was right after they were guided to their room. Even more so than the landlady's hospitality, the inside was cleaner than one could imagine judging by how it looked from outside.

Even so, a hostel was still a hostel. Since out of season it functioned as a private house, it was narrow in comparison to an inn, it gave off an 'at home' feel.

On the other hand, it calmed Takeru's mind.

Rather than in a refined inn, he preferred this one.

"...but this is no good."

When Takeru took a look at the room he was guided to, his face cramped up. The room wasn't dirty nor there was a shady atmosphere, it wasn't that.

It was a refined traditional Japanese room. It had an old-fashioned TV, yellowed hanging scrolls and a kotatsu in the center. It was truly a room one could feel at home in.

The problem in this case was that only one room was prepared.

They say that boys and girls beyond the age of seven shouldn't share a room with each other, for him to stay in one room with seven girls for the night, was very bad for him as a man.

"President, why didn't you prepare two rooms..."

"That's no good, Kusanagi-kunn. We're in middle of escaping, it would be dangerous if we're not together and get attacked!"

"If that's the case, then why are we staying in this hostel in the first place?!"

"It's okay〜. Landlady in here definitely won't sell us to Inquisition. If she did that, she would no longer be able to continue to operate this hostel〜."

It seemed to be quite popular with elderly people. Even in times and location like this, it was used as a base for neighbors to relax in, there was a possibility not only just the landlady, but the entire village would shelter them.

——*Then even more so, prepare two rooms...!*

Takeru retorted inside of his mind.

"Our members are almost all girls...! It might be weird for it to come from me, but how about you consider..."

When Takeru was about to say it, Mari raised her hand while fidgeting.

"I don't... really mind it though?"

Even as she said that, Mari continued to glance sideways at Takeru.

"M-me neither... i-it is all ri-right. Just... when we're changing... please go outside."

While covering her face with gloves flustered, Usagi shyly accepted sharing a room.

"Very well. As you wish. Everyone, let's have an org——"

As Ikaruga was about to say a dirty joke, Mari and Usagi hit her with the inn's slippers.

"I don't mind either. It's as President said, it's safer for us to be together."

"Don't care."

Ouka was serious, and Kanaria indifferent, each of them agreed on sharing the room with Takeru.

Other than Takeru, all the members entered the room one after another.

"Ohh, it's quite decent. There's a good taste and it feels nice... wait, not that... it's not time to be impressed... I need to check if there are any wiretaps...!"

"Since there's a teapot and leaves, I'll pour everyone tea later. Ah, there are teacakes. Rakugan? A reproduction of sweets from before the war... this makes me really happy."

Placing luggage on top of the mats, Ouka and Usagi began to look around the room.

Mari and Ikaruga also placed their luggage in front of the old-fashioned TV and looked around the room.

"Hee〜 it's great to have a kotatsu... hey, what's this?! This TV, you can't watch it unless you pay?! There's no remote?!"

"It doesn't use a remote, you use the buttons on the TV. If it's normal channels, you can watch them without paying. The programs you have to pay for are ones like this."

Ikaruga put a coin into the port, and an obscene video filled the screen.

"Kyaa kyaa kyaa! Why is there a lewd video on the TV?! Uwaa, egh... i-it entered inside there...?!"

"It's perfect for studying physical education isn't it. Hey, this TV, it receives the digital broadcasts. Is it a newest TV covered with antique leather? Or is it reproduced to look like pre-war? This hostel has to be reckoned with."

"...rather than that, isn't the food here yet? I'm hungry. Usagi, can you make something?"

Next to Ikaruga and Mari who were making a loud fuss by the TV was Kanaria, who was thrown some sweets by Usagi and started to devour them by herself.

"...it's powderish but tasty."

"Really, it's delicious. This taste would fit better with green tea rather than black〜."

Behind the two people enjoying rakugans, Ouka glared at the hanging scroll with a meek expression.

"This scroll, it's clearly suspicious... I see! Look, Takeru, we can't stay in this room! There's clearly a note affixed behind it! It must be an instant charm for eavesdropping!"

"....."

Because of exhaustion, clothes slipped down from Takeru's shoulders.

The hostel's Japanese-styled room has turned into the usual chaotic platoon's room in an instant.

"What... so I was the only one bothered by it."

"Ufufu, how maidenly♪."

Nagaru poked his arm repeatedly and teased him.

Usagi and Mari who were checking the luggage have smiled wryly to him as well.

"There's no need to think so deeply into it is there? It's not like we're sleeping together in one bed or seeing each other naked. Everyone stopped in Takeru's home before, too."

"That is right. This much is no different from being in the platoon room. As long as you go out when we change clothes, I..."

While saying so, Usagi was taking out clothes, but realizing she took out a bra she hurriedly stuffed it back inside.

That's when Nagaru clapped her hands as if she recalled something.

"Oh right〜, the word 'naked' reminded me of something."

Everyone's gaze gathered on Nagaru, she raised her index finger.

"As for the hot spring, the landlady has reserved us some private time."

"I see. In middle of a bath we're defenseless. My thanks for the consideration."

As Ouka nodded and said so, Nagaru smiled a bit wryly.

"However〜, we have only one hour〜."

"Even an hour is good enough. I'd welcome a bath to relieve tiredness."

"Yup〜, but, it's mixed bathing〜."

Nagaru's words resounded brightly and casually.

It took a moment for it to sink in everyone, and they all froze stiff.

"We can have mixed bathing for an hour since we're mostly girls we'll use women's bath〜, the men's bath is usually more populated, that's why."

" " " " "....." " " " "

"It's aalll riiight! I got a permission from the landlady for soaking in the bath while wearing towels! If everyone's together, we'll be safer♪. Naked socializing it is, naked socializing♪."

Nagaru already had a change of clothes and a towel in her hands.

They could use the hot spring for an hour from now on. No one had any choice.

Hot springs, simple words, and yet there was a lot to it.

The compositions vary from alkaline to acidic, there were those containing sulfur and iron, ones that were radioactive. They had various colors, blue and red, milky white or even black.

While bathing in them was acknowledged as good for the human body, there were differences between individual hot springs. Those were mainly unfounded stories and even superstitions.

However, among the hot springs there clearly were ones that had an effect on the human body, Inquisition started researching it quite a few years ago. Not only were there inns that placed Magical Heritages at the source, but also veins of magical absorbent ore that affected the hot springs as a natural phenomenon. Even if the effects were beneficial for the human body, Inquisition has cracked down on the business, stopping it.

And such illegal inns were devised in various manners, they kept the magical power suppressed as not to be found out but...

"...they're not hiding it at all."

Takeru let out an amazed voice seeing the hot spring in front of him.

The hot spring looked like a common open air bath-type. The water colors was that of green mixed with milky white.

However, it was glowing.

It was clearly shining.

Along with steam, sparkle rose up from the spring, looking like fireflies. Seeing particles of magic appear naturally at high density was very rare.

It was clearly artificially made with a Magical Heritage.

"This thing, it's a restoration spring from an RPG..."

Although he couldn't afford a luxury like games, once a month when he ate ramen on a discount in shop and read a weekly manga, Takeru saw something similar.

When he stood there amazed that Nagaru hid and didn't report this, the sliding door opened behind him.

"Woah, amazing concentration of magical power... the feeling of these particles, is it『Healing』property? Even so, this is quite a splendid hot spring, isn't it."

"Right〜, in the past they were addicted to explore regions in search of hot springs apparently〜."

"...President, can it be that the story about you looking for a Magical Heritage was a lie, and you came here because of your hobbies?"

"Waa... it's really sparkling."

"This is completely out. It's on few years of imprisonment level. Since we have no Seelie lets take a bit of it. We can use it instead of a first aid kit."

"...why does everyone have to take a bath together... on the inner side there was no such habit."

A group of girls has come in from behind.

At a glance it looked like a harem, but it was in fact difficult for one man to stay together with several girls. Even more so if it comes down to naked socializing. When he timidly turned around, he saw six girls with towels wrapped around them in there.

He was slightly relieved. While it's true that he had trouble focusing on anything, the places that ought to be hid were firmly hidden. The steam was fairly thick, making this situation not as disturbing.

...to think of it deeply, mixed bathing isn't that unusual, if I'm bothered too much they'll think of me as a closet pervert instead.

Takeru wasn't aware that it was already too late in the case of him being labeled as a closet pervert.

"Ehh〜, Kusanagi-kun isn't hunching over at all〜."

"Oh, that's true. How uninteresting."

Nagaru and Ikaruga stared at Takeru disappointed.

"You two, what were you thinking of me...!"

" "A closet pervert?" "

"?! I-I'm not a closet pervert! I'm not a pervert! M-my spirit is not as weak as to lose to desires of this degree!"

Takeru corrected them angrily two times.

"Oh, that so? Usagi, he's saying there's not enough stimulus."

"...eh?"

As Usagi excitedly peeked at the hot spring, Ikaruga approached her from behind and suddenly stripped of her towel.

The bath towel danced in the air, and Usagi's stark naked body appeared. She looked at Ikaruga's and Takeru's faces, then dropped the line of sight at her own body.

With bright red face she tried to hide her breasts but,

"Hyawaa?!"

"Yes, GO!"

Her back was pushed by Ikaruga, and she plunged forward towards Takeru.

In a hurry, Takeru tried to move forward to support her, but since the ground was slippery, he entangled with Usagi and fell into the hot spring.

Since Takeru fell into water while facing up, a lot of hot water has entered his nose all at once.

"Idiott, it's dangerous——gh?!"

When he raised his head from the water and opened his eyes——two dripping wet incredibly big bulges were sticking to his face. He grasped them with both of his hands, but immediately after realizing what was that he released his hands in a hurry.

After Takeru let them go, they floated on the water like a balloon, without losing buoyancy.

Even though there was steam, they were in full view at close distance.

"Auu... water has entered my eyes..."

Usagi became teary-eyed.

Her gestures and wet hair, in combination with her wet chest was as expected, entrancing to Takeru. Somehow, that coupled with her face and physique which looked very young gave it an exquisite immoral feeling. This is when Takeru understood the charm Ikaruga usually called "Big-titted loli" through his own blunder.

He didn't notice it before because he interacted with her as if she was his little sister, but looking at it from this perspective, it's truly...

"..... ——Haa?!"

Not good. He thought as he saw Ikaruga's face who stared in his direction and chanted "Closet pervert".

While pretending to be calm, he got concerned about Usagi who wouldn't open her eyes.

"A-are you okay Usagi? Can you stand?"

Rising up from the water, he lent Usagi a hand.

But, at that time, Usagi rubbed her eyes lowering her line of sight and opened her eyes widely.

The place her line of sight was directed to, was Takeru's crotch. When he jumped out of the bath water, the towel he had wrapped around his waist has disappeared somewhere.

"......hauaaa..."

Usagi's face turned bright red and she concealed it with both of her hands, through the gap in her fingers she saw it clearly. And once again, she started to cry.

"Usagi?! Did you hit yourself somewhere?!"

Not realizing his own appearance, worried about Usagi in the earnest, Takeru moved closer to her.

With Takeru's thing moving even closer, Usagi lost her consciousness and fell into the water on her back. Thinking it might have caused concussion Takeru hurried to her, but then he finally noticed everyone's gaze.

Everyone lined up in a row and stared at Takeru's crotch since he stood up from the hot spring.

"N-no... T-Takeru...is t-that...?"

"T-Takeru...y-yo....w-www-w-what a thing...!"

"......? What's that, it's big."

"Waa〜, it's splendid... thank you for the treat〜"

"I already knew. I have studied it before when he fainted."

Mari stared with a blush, and Ouka pointed with her finger, her lips trembling.

Despite not knowing what it was, Kanaria said her frank impression, for some reason Nagaru started praying while looking at Takeru, and Ikaruga stared at Takeru with an aloof expression.

That's when Takeru finally looked towards his crotch.

Seeing it his face turned red, and he sank his body into the spring in a hurry.

"No, it's not... this is... umm...!"

In front of Takeru who spoke hesitantly, Mari's and Ikaruga's expressions were dyed in anger.

"Hee〜〜〜〜..... since there's a reaction, that means a big-titted loli like Usagi-chan is closest to your preference. Rather, how dare you get horny with your comrade just because she's a woman, Takeruu...?"

"I'd like to say it can't be helped since it's a man's physiological phenomenon... but in this case, not to be even bothered with comrades eyes and get horny... bastard, you should be a martial artist right...? Spirit, technique and body... I'll beat those values into you again...!"

Bones in their fists soundly crackled, and the two released an aura full of anger. Takeru's face turned blue, and his earthly desires have diminished.

Takeru tried to excuse himself somehow——that's when.

Just when he thought he saw a shadow behind Ouka, Mari and Kanaria, four towels have fluttered in the air similarly to Usagi's.

"Chance!"

It was Nagaru who went around behind heir backs.

"Wai——!"

"Ue——?!"

"——Hey?!"

"Oh noes."

Three of them were horrified, and one as usual.

And Takeru too, in various meaning of the word and in various places was horrified.

"Ahahaha! Dayum!"

The four's backs were pushed from behind, and they plunged into the hot springs Takeru was in as well. Even as he trembled seeing the five approach, Takeru has firmly burned all their naked bodies into his eyes.

Yeah, surely, I'll get an unreasonable beating after this.

While thinking such a thing, Takeru sank into the bath once again, crushed by female bodies.

After five minutes, when the commotion in the bath finally settled down, Takeru immersed himself in water to his shoulder.

"Ahh... this is... invigorating."

Saying the line of an old man, Takeru exhaled comfortably.

Ouka and the others were washing their bodies. Although he couldn't see well in this steam, a sight of girls in a bath wasn't something one could see often.

A sight for sore eyes.

Usagi and Nagaru pressed down Kanaria who didn't want to wash her body, and scrubbed her forcefully.

On the opposite side of the spring, Ouka and Mari sat down side by side.

It wasn't really quiet in the hot spring, but because he was conscious of it Takeru picked up their conversation.

"Ootori Ouka, lend me shampoo."

"A-, wait don't take it without permission. Unlike you my hair is long... wait a moment longer."

When Mari hurried her, Ouka started bubbling her hair with all she had.

Mari stared at her as she did that.

"...? What is it, it's gross. Don't stare at me like that."

"No, I just thought that your hair is beautiful."

"? It's unusual for you to praise me, it makes it even more gross."

"Stop saying 'gross' 'gross'. I honestly praise good things for being good. Unlike you〜."

While saying so, Mari stole the shampoo from Ouka.

Ouka complained dissatisfied and returned to washing her hair.

"...if you praise this hair, even if it's you, it doesn't feel bad. When I was a child I was being teased for this hair color, but I really like it now."

"Since you were born with it, I think it's a good color, it looks like sunset."

"I think I inherited it from my mother, probably. I'm not familiar with her, but I think so."

"....."

"...this color is surely something given to me by my mother who tried to protect me."

She learned her own past after fighting with Laugh Maker and now said so.

Although Takeru didn't know the details, but he was told by Ouka that she was a witch.

Ouka placed a finger on her cheek and smiled wryly.

"Actually, I don't know whether she tried to protect me or not. It might be that I just want to think so. I want to think, that she... wanted to give birth to the child of a man she didn't know."

Mari responded with "hmm", and continued to wash her hair.

"Same for me, I don't know my real father and mother. I've said before that I grew up in orphanage, right?"

"...speaking of which, that's true."

"I don't know what kind of people they were, but I just have feelings of "gratitude" for them. My parents might have been real scum, and they might not have wanted for me to be born, but thanks to them I'm alive here and now. 'Thank you for letting me be born'... that's what I feel."

"....."

"That's why, if you're feeling happy to be alive, 'thank you' should be enough."

While saying so, Mari rinsed her hair under the shower.

"...is that so, I guess..."

Ouka just once, touched her hair and stroked it.

"This hair, when I fulfill my revenge, I intended to cut it short but... I won't do that. The only proof of me, being my mother's child is now only this body and hair."

"I see. I think you shouldn't cut it either. No matter the reason, it would be a waste."

Saying so with a candid tone of voice, Mari began to wash her body.

Ouka continued to glance sideways at Mari, suspicious.

She wanted to say something, but couldn't put it into words.

".....um... you have my thanks. I'm happy that you praised this hair of mine."

When Ouka finally spoke honestly, Mari stopped her hands that were washing her body.

There was a strange silence between the two. Embarrassed Ouka and unmoving Mari.

Remaining as she was and not moving, Mari murmured.

"Speaking of which, before I realized, you stopped referring to me rudely haven't you."

"...i-is that so? I didn't really do it consciously but... well, there is no longer any reason to refer to you like that. Although I'm reluctant, we currently have a relation akin to a united front."

"....."

"...i-it's a fact that calling comrades that way is not a good thing."

Comrade, saying that Ouka was genuinely embarrassed and hung her head.

Mari stared sideways at Ouka and squinted.

"That's... how to say it...um..."

"〜〜〜"

"——Gross."

Hearing an unexpected word, Ouka vigorously raised her face. Takeru slid moving his entire body into the water.

"What?!!"

"But that's how it is. You suddenly turning honest, is really spooky you know〜? Ahh gross, so gross. Eww ewww. I'm don't swing that wayy."

"Ahh, that's right, you were that kind of wench! Damn, give me the shampoo back you fuel tank!"

"Wai... how long are you going to drag on that nickname! I'm still using the shampoo! Also, pass me conditioner!"

"Don't go classifying your hair as better by yourself, you damn anpan woman!"

Although there was finally some good atmosphere between them, it returned to how it was in an instant. Takeru smiled wryly and thought that's probably the best for them.

"They've actually got a good relationship there."

"Woahh, you almost gave me a heart attack! ...what, it's just Suginami, so you were soaking in the bathtub."

Takeru was taken aback seeing Ikaruga appear imperceptibly beside him, observing Mari and Ouka.

Ikaruga immersed herself in the bathtub with just a towel on her chest.

Once again, he had problems focusing his eyes.

"Yeah, having someone you can speak honestly with is something to be envious of."

"Is that so? You have Usagi don't you."

And so do I, he wanted to say but decided to stop because it was embarrassing.

Ikaruga stared at Ouka and Mari sadly.

".....it's impossible for me to be as honest and straight as those two are."

She spoke with a sigh.

Normally Ikaruga said things straight, but it was 'thinking' and not her 'feelings'.

"I wonder since when, honestly conveying my feelings has began to feel a little scary..."

The frustration she experienced during the encounter with Isuka. Regret. What disturbed Ikaruga, were surely those feelings. For Ikaruga who in the past escaped from the laboratory and turned her back on her past, the loss that has befallen her when she took action to settle her past has caused her great despair.

It was understandable for her to become scared of moving according to her emotions.

Ikaruga faced towards Takeru and moved slightly closer.

"I haven't thanked you properly yet."

"?"

"...for bringing back Kanaria, thank you very much."

Oh that, Takeru thought. He tried to say that there's no need for that, but as Ikaruga's face approached him his words were stuck in his throat.

She closed her eyes and her lips closed onto his.

"...hey w-w-wai... wha-whassit??"

"What you ask, it's a thank you kiss."

Blankly, with a straight face she said something like a 'kiss'.

"No, I'm fine you don't need to thank me! It's something I did arbitrarily!"

"...that so. If not a kiss, then what would be good? I'll do anything for you now. How about my breasts?"

Ikaruga lifted her large breasts which floated in the water and rubbed it.

"Or maybe you want me to do it with my mouth? The real thing is a little... everyone's looking so the aftermath would be difficult."

"Suginami-san Suginami-san! Why is it all sexual service! Your thanks is enough, okay?!"

He unconsciously changed into polite speech. It was because Ikaruga didn't seem to be joking.

"I won't rest easy then. I can only give you all of myself. That's the only thing I can think of doing for you."

Ikaruga's expression was like seriousness itself. That is why he felt it would be awkward to openly refuse her.

Although the way she did it was indecent, her sincerity was the real thing.

...can it be, that this one doesn't know how to convey her thanks to others?

When she said that's the only thing she can think of, he got that feeling. What he's forgotten, was that this girl was also very clumsy.

Takeru calmed down and started to think of what to do, but then a commotion has broke out in the washing area.

After a sound of something rolling, came a sound of the sliding door being opened.

"Heyy! Kanaria-san! You still haven't properly washed your hair!"

"〜〜〜, enough washing! My skin's tingly!"

Still drenched and in the nude, Kanaria left the hot spring.

".....hmph."

When she was leaving, she turned around only once and glared at Ikaruga.

The door closed loudly, Usagi's sigh and Nagaru's laughter resounded.

"....."

Seeing Kanaria, Ikaruga sank into the water up to her mouth and started to blow bubbles.

And then, she raised her eyes which said that she has no idea what should she do.

As she was troubled, it was the first time he felt there's cuteness to her.

The one who could make Ikaruga make this expression, was definitely just Kanaria.

Casually, Takeru placed a hand on Ikaruga's head as she continued to blow bubbles.

"I know well how scary it is to be honest. But picking your words as not to hurt the other person is something only smart ones can do, it's impossible for me. That's why I say things straight. On the other hand, you look like someone acting arrogant and it's impossible to guess what you think, you're the type that chooses her words carefully."

"....."

"However, for me who can only live straightforwardly, if it's not a simple game, I'm no good. It was the same when I was to choose whether I kill Kiseki or not."

Ikaruga stopped blowing the bubbles and just moved her gaze at Takeru.

"Back then, the only thing I was able to do was to hug Kiseki. There was no leisure for me to convey anything with words... but those were my true feeling."

Recalling the moment the blade was about to pierce Kiseki, Takeru looked at the snow falling from the sky and melting in the hot water.

"I love Kiseki. But I want to live. I want to be with my comrades... and with Kiseki. These are my true feelings."

"....."

"If I killed Kiseki back then... I wouldn't become honest with my feelings, I couldn't die and leave things that way."

Takeru removed his hand from Ikaruga's head and once again sank to his shoulders. On the other hand, Ikaruga stood up from the water and gazed up at the sky.

"...your little sister is probably incredibly angry."

"Yeah. Still, right now there's no choice but to save her and apologize."

"...your little sister, is probably hurt and is suffering even now."

"Indeed. That's why, I need to grant her happiness beyond that suffering."

Ikaruga looked away from the sky and stared straight at Takeru.

"Why are you so strong?"

Strong. Being described so, unconsciously Takeru made a wry smile.

"Wrong... I'm just selfish and an idiot."

"....."

"And... I don't want to regret."

Takeru entered the water up to his mouth and started to release bubbles.

Hearing Takeru's words, Ikaruga raised her hips and stood up.

"Don't want to regret... yeah. You're right."

Since she didn't even try to hide her nude body, Takeru looked away in a hurry.

"I also hate regrets. I don't want to be too late anymore."

Surely, she was reminded of Isuka.

Ikaruga started walking through the spring, and moved out of it.

She must have decided to speak with Kanaria.

That's why he didn't say anything to her and just saw her off in silence.

"By the way, Kusanagi."

When Ikaruga put her foot on the edge, unexpectedly she turned only her head around to him.

And, she brought her hand to her mouth and mimicked holding something.

"Are you really okay with me not doing it with my mouth?"

Looking at him she shook her hand back and forth, then left the hot spring with her mouth in a '3' shape.

Although the washing place was still noisy, they enjoyed the hot springs exclusively.

Snow constantly poured from the sky, it was the best weather to enjoy hot springs.

Making sure no one is watching, he secretly ogled the girls.

It was bliss. Everyone was in hot springs in before, but it was the first time they could enjoy it for so long. His body was full of bruises and his muscles were at their limit due to abusing Soumatou, but thanks to this hot spring it was completely healed.

In a good mood, Takeru started humming as he enjoyed the hot spring.

"♪ Babanbabanban——"

"Host."

"——BAN?!"

Hearing a voice come from the side, Takeru's voice twisted.

Before he noticed, Lapis was standing in the bath. She didn't have a towel. She was stark naked. Lapis' body type was like that of a child, but reminded of when their skin came in contact in Magic Academy, he felt uneasy.

Lapis waded through the hot water and stood in front of Takeru.

"I-is it fine for you too to come to the bath?"

When everyone went to the hot spring they asked her if she's going, but since she said she isn't, they left her behind...

"You're not going to rust... or something, aha, ahaha..."

"....."

As Takeru tried to cover up his agitation by saying something irrelevant, Lapis turned with her back to him. A small and adorable butt appeared in front of him, but soon enough it sank in into the water.

Since she was right in front of Takeru, it rather meant, that she sat down on his lower body.

"Uhyaa" Takeru unconsciously raised a voice.

"P-please spare me from sitting on my knees in the bath..."

"Why?"

"No...we're both naked, that'd be bad right?"

"...you don't like it. I understand."

Understanding Takeru's words as rejection, Lapis quietly moved away from him.

And then, she curled up holding her small knees, in addition, she started letting out bubbles of air from her mouth just like Ikaruga did a moment earlier.

It was as if she was upset, similarly to how she was in Magic Academy. Back then, she was upset as a sword and as a Magical Heritage. This time, the reason seemed different.

Can it be that she's upset since she was left behind...?

Takeru wished for her to stay together with him as a sword and as a person but... what's this ticklish feeling.

"...L-Lapis, it's not like I don't like it, there's no need for you to leave so fast."

"Blub blub blub blub blub..."

Lapis continued to blow bubbles expressionlessly.

She approached Takeru from the side, who thought it can't be helped and immersed herself in water beside him.

"Geez, if you're going to be upset, you shouldn't have said you're not going in the first place... you're not too honest either, are you."

"....."

When he spoke to her with a wry smile, Lapis glanced sideways at him.

And, with an unexpected attack-like move, she grasped Takeru's left arm and pulled it towards herself.

"...Lapis?"

Lapis stickiness felt a little strange to Takeru. Although she was sticking to him quite a lot usually, it was rare for it to be this excessive.

It was like this ever since they left Magic Academy.

Does she cherish me that much?

As if to answer Takeru, Lapis blew bubbles from her mouth.

Although he couldn't hear it well, but it was probably "It's an error", he thought.

Kanaria left the hot spring and without wiping her hair, she came back to the room.

"....."

She stared at the room with a frown.

"...what is Kana doing in a place like this."

Asking herself, she bit her lower lip.

Kanaria has been starting to regret coming with Takeru.

She didn't really hate the 35th platoon. However, their carefree attitude only stirred up her frustration.

Even a moment earlier, Kanaria wanted to rush to Alchemist's headquarters and destroy everything.

She was unable to suppress those feelings.

Then why, has she listened to Takeru's words and followed him to such a place...

Why was her heart moved by the words of a man who knows nothing...

Why did she think of talking with the woman who deserted her mother and ran away...

Right now, she can't be honest. When she's in front of that woman, she can't maintain her calm. Emotions take over, and anger springs forth.

It's not like she didn't want to talk with her either...

"...it's fine."

Kanaria shook her head, discarding hesitation.

In order to calm herself, she took out a candy bar from her pocket and placed it in her mouth. As the intense sweet mint aroma passed through her nostrils, just a little her emotions have eased down.

She took off the slippers and walked on the tatami.

With her hand, she grasped the magical sword "Lævateinn" that leaned against the wall defenselessly.

After unsheathing the sword with both of her hands, she stared at the red blade.

".....it's all right. Even alone, I can do it."

Hardening her resolve, Kanaria narrowed her eyes.

Lævateinn was a Sacred Treasure just like Mistilteinn, but it was partially destroyed during the Witch Hunt War and lost majority of its capabilities.

Like other Sacred Treasures, this sword wasn't something that can be handled with a soul of a human. As a half-elf, Kanaria's soul's quality was close to an elf's and it was enough to handle this sword.

According to Orochi, Lævateinn's destructive power was beyond that of Mistilteinn's.

However, not only the power to kill the gods called 《God Hunting form》 was lost, but also the 《Hero form》 cannot be performed satisfactorily.

According to Mother, Lævateinn's personality and soul still dwelled inside of it, but Kanaria couldn't hear its voice. If the Magical Heritage's soul isn't linked with its user, its original power cannot be exercised.

Kanaria still wasn't acknowledged by Lævateinn.

An incomplete sword and incomplete user, if she attacked Alchemist right now it would end up with her getting killed. Kanaria was fully aware of that.

"...hey, say something, Lævateinn."

Frustrated, she spoke to the sword.

Lævateinn didn't answer. It looked to her like a lump of iron.

——You greenhorn.

To Kanaria, the red sword seemed to be saying so.

"...damn it."

In an outburst of anger Kanaria returned it into its sheath and turned around on her heel.

But when she tried to head for the exit, there stood the person she didn't want to confront the most.

It was Ikaruga. Her black hair was wet and her yukata was sticking to her skin. She probably came running in a hurry without wiping her body. Her chest was rising repeatedly with her rough breathing.

Kanaria's stare turned into a glare all at once.

"Move, you're in the way."

"...where are you going?"

"Nothing to do with you. I have no more business here. Being with you is pointless. Kana will go alone."

As Kanaria refused her bluntly, Ikaruga downcast her eyes.

Both of her hands in forming fists were trembling.

"...you must be hungry right? There will be a meal soon, it's not too late to eat. Let's have a dinner and some fun."

"Don't need it. I have no time. Outta way."

Kanaria tried to pass through Ikaruga uninterested.

When she attempted to pass by, suddenly Ikaruga caught Kanaria's hand.

Kanaria glared at Ikaruga with a frown, but soon after she looked away.

The expression of Ikaruga's who grabbed her hand was so compelling, it was as if a hammer has hit her.

"...wait... don't go. You can't go."

"L-let go. Why do I have to listen to your orders."

"It's not an order... it's a request... there's something I want to talk with you about."

"Ngh.....!"

Turning towards Ikaruga who wouldn't let go of her hand, Kanaria unsheathed her sword.

She pressed the point of the sword against her throat and grit her teeth.

"What are you trying now! I have nothing to talk about with you, who left Mama and ran way!"

"...Kanaria."

"D-don't call me by my name! This is the name Mama gave me! I don't want to be called that by you!"

Kanaria yelled in anger. Even though she wanted to reject Ikaruga calmly, her emotions overflowed and her tone has turned rough.

It was always like that. Even in Magic Academy, she had too much of a temper and couldn't make friends. She was a poor talker and couldn't understand people's minds.

She tried to pull back the sword from Ikaruga's throat and go outside.

Ikaruga grasped Lævateinn with both her hands.

"?!"

Kanaria opened her eyes wide in surprise. If she pulled the sword back with the momentum she intended to use, Ikaruga's finger would easily be cut off. As expected, Ikaruga's blood dripped from the cut skin.

"...I don't mind if you cut off my finger and pierce my neck. If you listen to my story in exchange, that would be cheap."

"Don't screw..."

"I'm not screwing around. If I let you go right now, I wouldn't be able to face Isuka. I'd rather die than let you go."

At Ikaruga's straight gaze, Kanaria's pupils shook.

"...you...it's unfair..."

"Yeah. I think so too. But, if you don't want to kill me... just for a while, I want you to listen to what I have to say."

"....."

"...please."

Ikaruga's blood flowed down the blade and reached Kanaria's hand.

The moment the blood was about to reach Kanaria, she released strength from her hand.

Five minutes later. Ikaruga made Kanaria sit in the kotatsu and wiped her head with a towel.

Kanaria stayed silent, her mouth formed a 'へ' shape as she trembled in shame and humiliation.

"This... what are you..."

"At this rate you'll catch a cold, right?"

"This is different from just listening, Kana didn't hear of it."

"Don't move, it'll be over soon."

Being calmed down, Kanaria remained silent even though she looked dissatisfied.

Ikaruga made a faint smile and gently wiped Kanaria's hair with a towel. The wounds on her hands were healed immediately as she put them in the hot spring's water.

A situation where she touched Kanaria's hair was a wonder for Ikaruga.

She thought Kanaria was disposed of by Alchemist, it was beyond her expectations that Isuka worked behind the scenes to allow Kanaria to live.

It's already been five years. Kanaria seems to think that Isuka was the one who gave her the name, but it was actually given to her by Ikaruga.

Of course, Ikaruga was not being thoughtless. Just as Kanaria said, that she shouldn't act as if she was her mother... Ikaruga too, thought that Isuka alone was Kanaria's mother. She didn't think of calling herself Kanaria's mother this late, and even if she was her mother, she didn't know what kind of thing a 'mother' was.

However, she cannot let this child who was born because, die as a result of her inaction.

"You've grown big haven't you. Even though only about five years have passed."

"...rapid growth. I was made to grow faster."

Kanaria faced sideways and murmured dissatisfied.

Rapid growth. In order to use clones and fantastical organisms for experiments, their bodies' growth is accelerated with Magical Heritages and chemical treatment.

It has a tremendous burden on human cells and as a result, their lifespan runs out in just a few years, but the elves' case is an exception. It's because the lifespan of an elf nears a thousand years.

Even so, as she is now, Ikaruga couldn't judge it as something positive.

Pain echoed inside of her chest.

"...you sure don't look like someone who's five."

"The knowledge was planted by using equipment. Don't think of me as child. Kana is good at studying. I'm smarter than you."

While it was possible to accelerate bodily growth and implant knowledge, it was impossible to develop mental age with devices. Judging from just her behavior, it was obvious that Kanaria's mentality was like that of a five year old's.

If she was a normal child, she would be still in kindergarten.

"I'm sorry."

"...what are you apologizing for."

"The reason you were treated like an experimental animal in Alchemist, is all my fault."

Because of the guilt, Ikaruga's voice was slightly trembling.

She couldn't afford to act shocked. Although there was very little she could do even if she apologized, but because she continued to blame herself over the long years, apologizing in front of the person herself tensed her up even more.

"...I wasn't really treated like an experimental animal."

"...eh?"

"Before Kana was disposed of, Mama protected me. No other researcher has ever done anything to me."

It was something Ikaruga heard for the first time. For a long time she knew that Kanaria was scheduled for disposal, but she didn't think Isuka would protect Kanaria herself.

She was unable to even imagine what kind of relationship did Isuka and Kanaria had.

Ikaruga felt like there was a very difficult bond between the two of them.

"...you, what do you intend after meeting Kana."

Questioned by Kanaria, she was unable to answer immediately.

After about ten seconds, she closed her eyes.

"To atone. Even I feel responsibility for creating you. I have played around with life... although I was unaware of it, that fact is undeniable."

In the middle of Ikaruga speaking, Kanaria soundly clenched her fist, her shoulders trembling.

Ikaruga predicted Kanaria would be angry when she said "atone". Still, there were no other word that could be used.

Even if she was forced to, she couldn't say anything affectionate like a mother would. She didn't know what a mother was , she didn't know anything of the pain from giving birth, and didn't think of a child that wasn't connected to her by blood as her child. Her emotions weren't clouded with something as cheesy as 'love'.

Responsibility, regret and need atonement. The feelings Ikaruga had for Kanaria were just that.

That's how it should have been.

"It's true that I ran away leaving you and Isuka. Because I ran away, Isuka suffered. The reason Isuka died is also because of me."

"....."

"The last thing Isuka left behind was you... that's why I want to protect you, whom she wanted to protect. I'm fine with you hating me. I'm fine with being hated. That's why... I want you to allow me to remain beside you."

What clumsy words are these, she thought to herself.

Even if it wasn't Kanaria, anyone would get angry hearing such selfish words.

She thought of herself as of a person who doesn't get nervous, and yet to think that in the end she would speak so poorly...

Before she realized, Kanaria released her fist and faced down.

"You, do you think of yourself as of my mother?"

"...no. Your mother is Isuka. I helped you be born in order to use you."

Ikaruga moved the towel away from Kanaria's head and braced herself as if to endure.

"Don't lie. Kana knows. She heard from Mama. You two made Kana together."

"...that's..."

"But, Kana's mama is only Mama. To think of you as of my mother.... I will definitely, never do it. Kana absolutely won't forgive you."

After being rejected this much, Ikaruga was unable to say the truth.

That before she left Alchemist, she tried to help both Isuka and Kanaria. That Isuka rejected her, and it was too late for Kanaria.

But, it was true that she turned her back on them and ran away.

Even if she was rejected, she was fine just by holding her hand forcibly. She judged that it's too late for Kanaria just because of the candy that fell on the floor. It wasn't too late to check the bodies.

Although it was a fact that she tried to save her, she wasn't determined enough and didn't attempt to save her as much as she should have.

Kanaria stood up from the kotatsu and started walking towards the room's exit.

Lævateinn remained, placed by the wall.

"...if you want to be close, do as you please. In exchange, don't get in Kana's way. Kana doesn't care about you. Live you please, die as you please."

Although she spoke as if forcing that out, Ikaruga was happy.

With relief, her expression unconsciously loosened.

"That's fine. Thank you."

Not responding, Kanaria headed towards the exist in a quick pace.

Staring at Kanaria's back, Ikaruga hesitantly called out.

"Your name."

"....."

"The name "Kanaria"... I've heard from Isuka that it was taken from a picture book. It's a name of a bird who longed to be a human, and has become a human."

".....so what."

"Canary is a caged bird, but the girl in the picture book lived her life as a person and has obtained happiness. Surely, Isuka wanted for you to obtain happiness like a normal human."

"....."

"There's nothing I can do for you but... Isuka, has been thinking of you properly."

Kanaria put her hand on the doorknob, vigorously opened the door and left.

Left behind, Ikaruga lowered her hand that she was stretching in the air and hung her head down.

She concealed her face with one hand and sighed.

"What wishing for happiness. Don't screw around. Stop lying."

Ashamed of her own words, Ikaruga hid her face.

In the end, Ikaruga spat out two lies.

First, the name Kanaria was given by her, not by Isuka.

And the second, is that she didn't wish for anyone's happiness when she gave it.

"Even though you had not a shred of guilt... don't go naming people on a whim... idiot."

As if to punish herself, Ikaruga bit her lower lip. She only wished that Kanaria will live never learn that she was the one who named her.

Chapter 3 - Peace Talks

"So, they been sighted at Kan'etsu?"

In the parking lot area, Magnolia who came to search for the 35th Test Platoon held cocoa in one hand and a mobile phone against her ear.

The person she spoke with was her subordinate from EXE who was in charge of the checkpoint on the Kan'etsu express road.

《"Yes. It's the same one as the one sighted at old Fukushima."》

"And the checkpoints on the civilian roads?"

《"We have set them at various locations, but as expected we're understaffed. We're in the middle of a war so... lack of manpower can't be helped. Also, the info from EXE's search unit hasn't come yet. We can hardly move because of snow."》

"Well, it can't be helped. Mass produced "Guillotine" isn't really suited for searching as it is now."

Magnolia said with a shrug.

《"...um, by the way vice captain, do you know why is that bunch heading north?"》

"....."

《"The north is strongly scarred by the previous war, and there's Sanctuary scattered all over it. Therefore, there are many Inquisition's facilities in there, going south would be best course of action for them..."》

"Hey, you. Since when did I allow you ask me questions?"

When she suddenly increased pressure in her voice, the EXE member on the other side gasped.

"The only reason you were enlisted as EXE, was 'cause we needed contractors for "Guillotine". Little shits like you with no ability shouldn' get full of themselves. I hate opportunistic bastards like you."

《"...m-my apolog—— "》

Before the subordinate could finish his apologies, Magnolia ended the call.

She threw the mobile into the car.

"Ahh dammit. Maybe I promised too much without thinkin' of it, for a job like this a guy like Kurogane is better... this ain't a job for me."

While Magnolia's legs trembled strongly, she slurped the cocoa.

That's when, a single woman with a wobbly gait and a big person with a stature of a giant came from the direction of the parking.

The woman's hair was incredibly long, and her face was completely hidden by her bangs. She held soft-serve ice cream in both her hands.

"...Mag-san... as you said... sweets... I bought some..."

Standing on the snow was a woman, speaking in a voice subdued and quiet enough to melt away.

The giant stood in silence beside her.

Magnolia placed the cocoa on top of the car and stared towards the woman while rubbing her body.

"Yer late——hey why is it purple sweet potato cream!"

"...soft cream...is sweet...cold... delicious...moreover, regional...fufu, fufufufufu."

"Consider the damn season! Also, that ain't somethin' to laugh about!"

No matter how much she retorted, the woman forced soft cream on Magnolia. Reluctantly receiving it, Magnolia started devouring the soft cream while trembling.

"...damn, what an unlucky day. Gou, you eatin' up before we get into action too?"

"....."

The giant stared at Magnolia.

He didn't say a single word nor did he even nod, but Magnolia who had known him for a long time took it as a 'yes'.

Those two, were EXE members just like Magnolia.

The woman who looked like a ghost was Ootori Kagerou. The giant didn't have a last name, and was called "Gou".

"...by the way... those children... did you find them...?"

"Mm nope. All those guys are useless. Well, still, there are checkpoints on the better developed roads and they ain't goin' to move fast on minor roads."

After Magnolia said that while eating, for some reason Kagerou has started to tremble.

"Tha...t's...t-then...children position...is still...unknown?"

"Well, still, 's fine. We'll know soon eno——"

"What to do——what to do what to do what to do what to do what to do what to do what to do...!"

Kagerou suddenly got upset and with both hands, she covered her face hidden behind long bangs.

Noticing the anomaly in Kagerou, Magnolia made a tired expression.

"That's no good...at this rate...Sougetsu-sama w-will hate me...we need to hurry and find the children...i-if we don't tear them apart...I'll be scolded...!"

"...our mission is to capture them not tear them apart though."

"E-even though I t-thought t-t-this time, Sougetsu-sama will praise me..."Kagerou you are a good wife" and y-yet...at this rate...!"

"I said it's fine! What's up with your forced ideas! Depression?! Are you depressed?!"

Kagerou chewed on her nails behind her bangs. Blood flowed from her fingertips and dyed her hands red. Seeing Kagerou's insane action, Magnolia spat out a sigh.

"...ahhh fine, I get it I get it. I wanted to suppress erosion as much as possible but... let's ask Little Sister."

While saying so, Magnolia removed the top of EXE uniform and exposed her chest.

In the vicinity of the bulge that was her breast was a painfully-looking scar. It was as if she was tortured. Not only the chest, her entire body was in that state.

In that scar in the center of her chest, there was something like a dark red tumor.

The tumor had a cut in the middle. That tumor-like thing had a human eyelid attached to it. Behind it, lurked a single eyeball.

Magnolia placed her nails on the tumor and scratched it lightly.

"...now, Hyakki Yakou, tell me where is your beloved Onii-chan."

When she spoke words of power, blood flowed from the scratched portion of the tumor.

At the same time, the firmly closed eyelid on the tumor slowly opened.

Seeing the scenery, the eye with red pupil shook as if frightened.

The eyeball has turned bloodshot all at once and shed tears of blood.

"——Khh...!"

Magnolia fell to her knees on the snow and vomited in pain. The tumor on her chest has begun to spread throughout her body using blood vessels, as if eroding her.

"Ga...ha...!"

Feeling as if her body was broken like a wooden stick, Magnolia screamed.

As she closed her eyes to withstand the pain, a portion of her body rose up and her bones have protruded. The bone that appeared in a place it wasn't supposed to was——a horn.

Red, a red horn reminiscent of a demon's.

"...good girl...! Okay, it's okay. Any more ain't na good...! Now then, cute, cute little sister——w-where's yer Onii-chan?"

Grasping snow with her hands, Magnolia instructed something that was implanted in her.

Momentarily, Magnolia's vision was dyed red and flew somewhere.

Her vision has sprinted. The sight she shouldn't be able to see has began to flow into her at high speed.

It was like point of view of a swallow that flew almost grazing the ground. The vision that flew was not light and colors, Magnolia knew that it's heat and smell.

The vision passed private houses while crawling on the ground and moved towards a deserted road.

And, it headed to a single room in a hostel. It sensed body temperature and smell of eight people inside of the room.

Among them, the moment she saw a single boy——suddenly the tumor started to erode Magnolia's body, releasing tentacles and violently toss about.

"Khh——Contact the first laboratory! Make Suginami Suzaku immediately raise the dream's potency!"

Listening to orders Magnolia cried out, Kagerou operated her mobile phone with amazing speed and connected to Alchemist's first laboratory.

Immediately after Kagerou relayed the instructions, the tumors activity that was eroding Magnolia's body ceased. As she exhaled, Magnolia's body turned back to normal.

"...haa...haa... ha-haha, the moment she found her brother's smell... she started lusting."

"...and...did you find their location...?"

"Hey, worry about me a little... well, I did."

Standing up, Magnolia fixed up the buttons on her chest and spat out a sigh.

'They were using a minor road after all. That bunch, they're all carefree staying in a hostel. To discover the dissidents home base I thought of letting them free for a while..."

She instructed two of her comrades to get in the car and then sat down in the back seat.

In the driver's seat was Gou and Kagerou sat down in the passenger's seat in front.

"Haa, even so... that's some outrageous little sister there... Kiseki-chan was it? That love-hate whirlpool for her brother is too much."

Entrusting her body weight to the seat, Magnolia dropped her line of sight at the red tumor on her chest and laughed mockingly.

"Rather than sibling love it's obviously... kuhaa! Disgusting, really! Those demon creatures sure have no restraints for incest!"

Magnolia laughed genuinely having fun.

There were no signs of the snow ceasing to fall, the visibility was horrible.

Even so, Magnolia saw the path they had to follow.

Through the heretical power that dwelled inside of her——

* * *

North of old Shizuoka, in the past beside Fuji mountain Japan has boasted about was a crowded city full of tourist attractions, but it no longer existed.

The place was close to Sanctuary and people were forbidden to live in this area.

There were ruins lined up just like in the Grey City of old Tokyo's southern part, but what was different, is the fact that unlike the Grey City, all houses were actually covered in ash.

Currently Fuji had been destroyed from the middle upwards to the summit and it didn't have even a third of the altitude it used to. After being outnumbered in the Witch Hunt War, with Kinki and Tokai regions being occupied by enemy, Inquisition caused the volcano's eruption as their last resort. Because of this operation volcanic ash fell on the neighboring prefectures, using the confusion Inquisition recaptured Fukui and Nagoya. It's been said that volcanic ash continued to fall until the war has ended.

"Choosing the greatest battleground as the location, those two have an unexpectedly bad taste."

Wearing a thick coat made of fur, Sougetsu looked at the blown apart Fuji and muttered.

"Seeing this scenery makes me sorrowful... it's wasted... beyond salvation... barren..."

He scooped the ash under his feet with his hand, it flowed, exposed to wind.

The ash was carried away and fluttered in the wind.

"...it's terrible, really."

"——You are the one who made this scenery."

Hearing firm footsteps on the ash, Sougetsu faced towards the voice.

A woman white as snow and a blind man in kimono like a ghost stood there.

It was Mother Goose and Orochi. There was no one else in there other than them. Even without soldiers as escort, the Valhalla's executives came unconcerned.

"It'd be troubling if you misunderstood. If you didn't set elves on us, we wouldn't have to resort to using such means."

"Sophistry. Having dark elves enter the battlefield wasn't planned ever since the start. We just wanted to protect her. You are the one who made her go out of control."

"The one who wanted to protect her is just you, Gungnir. Even without me inciting her, one of your top bunch would have used elves."

Mother Goose and Sougetsu stared at each other, and assaulted each other with their claims. However, the one who pulled away first was Sougetsu.

"Just jooking. There's no point putting up a façade in front of you. That's right. I'm the one who led this world to the brink of ruin."

He spread his arms and spat out, glaring like a devil.

Neither Mother nor Orochi were upset.

Their fight with Sougetsu wasn't something that started just now.

After several hundred years it still continued.

"So? I admire you for making a incarnation of destruction like me come here for peace talks... but I don't think there's any meaning in that. If you really wanted to convince me, you wouldn't have called me to a ruined place like this would you?"

Sougetsu laughed under the gray sky.

Opening his mouth like a cat, happily, merrily, he laughed.

Mother only moved her lips, answering Sougetsu's question.

"Calling it peace talk was misleading wasn't it. Peace negotiations might be correct instead."

"Oh, nuance changed slightly."

"In the first place, we didn't find any meaning in this war. Or rather, we're not interested in it. Humans and witches, the war between two of the same race won't change anything, it's obvious that nothing will be born out of that. The existence we are warring against is only one... it's you."

Slowly raising her fingertip as Sougetsu, Mother said indifferently.

"It's not war between humanity and witches. It's the war between us and you. There is no need to involve the residents of this world."

"...so it's that? Stop fueling this war, let's settle this quickly by killing each other here? Oh-hoh, so my provocation from when we spoke through the phone, was actually on the mark, wasn't it."

I'm beat, Sougetsu laughed mockingly.

Next to Mother who calmly relayed that, Orochi put a hand on his sword.

Mother stopped Orochi who released murderous intent and once again faced towards Sougetsu.

"For now, that's how it is. For the time being our side's internal affairs have calmed down. Currently, the inner world's "Pureblood Party" that has arbitrarily launched an invasion is raising funds for a full-fledged invasion of the outside. Once this war has fully flared up, there will be no pulling back any more. It's only a matter of time until the witches full force invades your territory."

"Ain't that fine. Bring it on. Isn't it wonderful. That is why this world is so nice."

As if blessing the conflict between human beings, Sougetsu affirmed the war.

On the opposite side, Mother denied it. There is no need for humans to fight with humans, she thought.

The war should be limited to inhuman heretics.

"...from here on it will be negotiations. If you accept the duel here, we will stop the military's invasion of the inner side."

"A duel... that sounds manly doesn't it, is it one of Orochi-kun's hobbies? Let me ask, how do you intend to stop it?"

"Of course forcefully."

Mother said it in an indifferent, perfectly clear tone of voice.

Happily, Sougetsu opened his eyes wide.

"That's hilarious... while you boast of loving this world, you would use force against your brethren if they're in your way. That's right... that is your true nature, and our true nature too."

"Yes. Whether it's me from the past or me from the present, I do not mind a minimal amount of sacrifices. My host is similar in this aspect."

"Hahahaha! You've been tainted by this inorganic woman quite a bit... completely different from Kusanagi-kun."

Orochi listened to Sougetsu's harsh voice with eyes open.

In response to Sougetsu's words, what dwelled in his eyes wasn't anger, but affirmation.

The white, cloudy eyes gouged out by the sword of his beloved older sister Mikoto seemed to have been staring at the past, rather than at the scenery.

"...certainly, Takeru is different from me. Unlike me, he doesn't give up and discard things of low-priority and chooses to save things that are beyond what he can hold with his arms at once. My great self is... I, am proud of him."

Orochi closed his eyes and the murderous intent overflowed.

It seemed like Orochi pulled out his sword, but instead he made a gesture as if he threw something to the ground.

It was like a gesture of a samurai prepared for death challenging someone to a duel, challenging them by discarding the sword's sheath.

"If it's him and Mistilteinn, he'll be able to pull off what I couldn't. Even if he takes God Hunter form, he won't become your puppet."

"Can it be, that the one who made him and Lapis deepen the bond was you?"

Not even nodding, Orochi silently confronted Sougetsu.

Sougetsu remained silent for a while, but before long, he covered his face with a hand and started laughing

"Orochi-kun, that's a fatal miscalculation. Your speculation will backfire completely. If you take your purpose into the account, the ideal relationship between Twilight Type and its master for them would be a similar to that of yours and Gungnir's, one of matching interests. Rather than a sword, if that thing deepens its bond with him as a person——it'll have an opposite effect."

"I am aware of it."

"Thanks to you, Kusanagi-kun ended up becoming an existence closer to a God Hunter than anyone else. You didn't show him the way, but fully aware you have driven him into a dead end, haven't you?"

When Sougetsu asked, Orochi snorted then laughed.

"Retard. Even if his destination is a dead end, it's a tradition of Kusanagi to break through and open a way. I was unable to do it, but he can. Is it bad for me to count on his potential?"

The way the corner of his mouth raised up, was similar to Sougetsu's wicked smile.

Sougetsu narrowed his eyes and stared at Orochi as if he was an ant struggling at his feet.

"It's not bad... but, you sure grew up into a horrible adult. It feels like I'm looking into the mirror."

"Don't lump me together with you, bastard. Even if I'm evil, there is love inside of me."

"Is there any love in guiding someone towards destroying the world? So you don't mind if the fate of confronting him as an enemy comes?"

"Ha, that's still trillion times better than have it go as you want it. A showdown with my own disciple, ain't that dramatic, that's more of a blessing than I deserve as his master."

"....."

"Speaking seriously, unlike Mother I couldn't care less about the world's fate. I've told you bastard what's my purpose, haven't I."

As Orochi confessed that, Mother furrowed her eyebrows just a little.

Sougetsu raised a loud, dull laughter and glared from behind his hand that was covering his face, his eyes narrowed and made up a crescent shape.

"Let's get back to the topic... about the peace negotiations, we respectfully refuse. I'm not as skilled in fighting as you guys are, so I'm not going to do such a barbaric thing."

"....."

"The ones who have acted first in this case are witches. Pureblood Party is an organization that's authorized in the inner world, and there is a potential of entire West Side joining Pureblood Party. And it's those guys that have been dabbling in terrorism on this side, as well as attacked us. It might be anachronistic, but it's the same as an act of aggression from another country."

"....."

"The war can no longer be stopped. Humanity is already aware of witches country existence. Isn't it unreasonable to stop it now? If something's taken from us, we retake it. If a stone is thrown at us, we throw back the stone. That's the logic of this world. That's the logic of humans."

He released the hand from his face and spread out his arms to the sides.

"Please... *don't get in the way of my hobbies.*"

Mother's face that was always calm and indifferent, had genuinely distorted.

It was clouded with justifiable hatred and anger.

"You... are you saying war is a hobby for you?"

"Indeed. War is my hobby. And destruction is my raison d'etre."

That moment, negotiations have completely broke down.

On the contrary, it was obvious from the beginning it would go this way.

Still, the reason they have performed peace negotiations was Mother's courtesy for this world.

If they were able to erase Sougetsu, war, the conflict between witches and humans, they would be able to write off everything.

"...understood. Then, let's start it right now. Our war. I will kill you and change the world."

"It would be fine if you did that right from the beginning."

In the middle of tense atmosphere, Orochi took a step forward.

He raised a single hand forward and clenched it into a fist. Opening his cloudy eyes widely, Orochi spat out a deep breath.

And,

"I am Herjann. I am Uzr. I am Alfozr. I am Vizurr and therefore——"

When he raised his fist towards the heavens, Mother's body who stood next to him turned into white particles.

At the same time a giant magical circle expanded under his feet. Particles wrapped around Orochi's body and shone to their limit.

Orochi's unseeing pupils firmly stared at Sougetsu's figure, but before long were wrapped in the particles.

"——I become avatar of furious Odin."

The light dispersed and appearance of Orochi who became a variant has appeared.

The armor reminiscent of the finest silver no one could reach, concealed by a black mantle it was shining. Orochi's head too, was fully covered by armor, every part of his skin was covered with it.

This appearance was very similar to Takeru's in Mistilteinn's 《God-Hunter form》.

In the hand that was raised towards the heavens was a dazzlingly bright, large sword.

That sword was truly, the Sacred Treasure "Gungnir".

Used for the unifying the world of Norse mythology, a weapon that embodied the god's majesty.

"A sword huh... although it does seem incomplete, you're sure handling it well with a human body. Unlike Mistilteinn and Lævateinn, this one should have been more expensive though."

"....."

"...even if you have a soul of a demon, it should require three times that right? And even if you managed to handle it, you shouldn't be able to demonstrate even 10% of the original."

"So what. For me, as long as it doesn't break me, I'm fine with it. To kill you bastard——a single time is enough."

When Orochi set up his sword, Sougetsu snapped with his fingers.

At the same time, space around them distorted and dozens of figures releasing particles of magical power appeared. People wearing clunky iron-colored armors on their bodies. In their hands they had guns shaped like a sword and in the center of their barrels concentrated distorted light of magical power.

Mass-produced Relic Eaters "Guillotine".

There were fifty of them. Everyone expanded armor plates akin to wings and hovered in the air.

Artificially manufactured Magical Heritages... sensing the oddity of magical power enclosed inside of them, Mother gasped.

《"...this magical power... you, it can't be...!"》

"You guessed well. That's right, the power source these Relic Eaters are using are witches we have caught up until now. Ecological isn't it? Each Relic Eater is powered by fifty people, and it has cranial nerves of ten people connected directly for generating operative procedures. In other words, it's a flesh-and-blood, living Relic Eater."

《".....!! You——do you hate this world that much?!"》

The moment Mother got furious, fifty members of EXE attacked Orochi at the same time.

Rather than in close combat, they were shooting from long distance. While flying in the air they expanded magical circles and released concentrated magic in unison.

Jet black small spheres were fired and closed onto Orochi.

《"Concentration of magic is abnormal! Evade!"》

Just as instructed to by Mother, Orochi kicked off the ground and avoided.

The light spheres didn't hit him, fifty of them have landed on the ground.

However, their destructive power was beyond Orochi and Mother's imagination.

"———!"

Behind Orochi, a tremendous amount of energy came from the point it has landed.

When he triggered Soumatou and guarded himself over the shoulder, the jet-black magical power had already surged.

Avoidance was impossible.

Orochi's body was swallowed in jet-black magic in an instant.

Magical power exploded. Fifty rounds of light spheres have resulted in tremendous destruction.

《Quietus》

This magic was one that gathered various magical power's properties and created "Chaos" property magic power, then activated a dedicated operative procedure. It was magic Elizabeth who held the "Almighty" property was specialized in.

In the radius of 50 meters from where Orochi stood before, everything disappeared in an instant.

While Sougetsu had his comrades who were equipped with Guillotine expand protective barriers, he stared at Orochi as he was being swallowed by the magic.

In exchange for not being having any intrinsic performance, Guillotine could use magic of the witches that were their power source. Simply put, each of them had the power of fifty witches.

"...I leave the rest to you. If I stay here any longer, I'll get caught up in this."

"Yes sir. However, with that destructive power it's probably been settled already."

One of the men who were expanding protective magic beside Sougetsu spoke, as he turned on his heel and started walking away.

Sougetsu glanced sideways at the face of his subordinates and spoke expressionlessly.

"...there's no way those two would kick the bucket with just this much."

"Eh?"

While 《Quietus》 aftermath has surrounded them, the subordinates have looked in the back of it with shocked expressions.

There, they saw something unbelievable.

In the middle of "Chaos" magical property sweeping all over and lightning pouring from, shone a pair of blazing eyes.

At same time, a chill ran down their spines.

And the next moment,

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style's instructor, Kusanagi Orochi——on the battlefield."

The aftermath of 《Quietus》 was blown away all at once.

As if hit by the impact of the cloud being dispelled, the subordinates lost their voices.

Standing in the center, Orochi was clad in silver-colored lightning and swung his sword.

Rather than an explosion, it was pressure from the sword. Just now, it wasn't Gungnir's intrinsic magic like that of Mistilteinn's, nor even its intrinsic performance. It functioned simply as a sword.

Orochi blew away 《Quietus》 with just pressure from his sword.

His appearance looked like that of a beast.

The armor covering his face tore open like a beast's. The way he held his sword was nonsensical to anyone who had any knowledge of swordsmanship, it looked like a mad dog that has been given a sword to hold.

That figure nor style, was nothing like that of a divine knight.

It was appropriate to call it avatar of anger and violence——a monster.

EXE members clad in Guillotine once again shot 《Quietus》 in unison.

However, before they could release it, without even giving them time to gasp Orochi approached from the front and slaughtered one of them.

——They couldn't see it. Catch up to it. Block it.

Guillotine that had a several times stronger armor than a Dragoon was cut in two as if it was made from tofu.

Cut in two... that's wrong.

Because of the incredible speed, the moment the person has been slashed and cut in two, they have burst on impact. Although it should have been a slash, the surface of the cut exploding was a bizarre sight.

What made this spectacle into reality, was way too fast.'

"What happe——"

A sound of a skull crumbling has rang out.

Orochi grasped the head of the upset EXE member and threw him to the ground. That too, was too fast to follow with one's sight. For those who were in the location, it looked like the soldier who has been flying in the air warped into the ground and its brain's fluids scattered all over.

"R-release a barrage! There's no need to aim! Stay away from him!"

The remaining 48 EXE members begun to rapid fire 《Quietus》. With this much rapid-fire, the ground would collapse beyond what its prototype was capable of.

However, Orochi deflected 《Quietus》 with the edge of his sword directly at the soldiers.

More than half of 《Quietus》 exploded in mid-air, slaughtering them.

Guillotine's magic wasn't slow. It had the magical power of fifty witches and operative procedure capability of ten people, thanks to that it was able to release 《Quietus》 in rapid fire.

Moreover, they used magic increasing the brain's processing speed, making their users reflexes ten times faster than that of ordinary people. And yet——they still couldn't hit Orochi. They even couldn't see him.

It was like a giant stomping on ants.

"You too should go back and join the battle. At this rate they won't hold out even a minute."

"...wha."

"You've finally been entrusted with a Relic Eater, so you need to serve adequately to what you got, okay?"

While smiling, Sougetsu hit the soldier's shoulder and immediately started walking away.

It's a joke right? With expression saying that, the subordinates cramped up.

The battlefield was like hell in a pot. A demon rampaged inside playing around with sinners. Unable to even raise a scream, EXE personnel couldn't help but be eaten by the demon.

We're supposed to dive into that?

The EXE members who were protecting Sougetsu could only stare at the hell in shock.

Taking one step back, one of them tried to run further from the battlefield towards the back.

"——Sorry. I've no grudge against you, but now that it has turned into war, I can't make any more allowances."

A voice came from behind. The culprit who has created this hell was for some reason behind him.

The subordinate couldn't turn around.

He knew that even if he turned around, it was useless.

"I don't know how does it look like, but apparently afterlife has been confirmed to exist. If you've any complaints, I'll hear them there."

"..... .....!"

"That's why for now——drop dead like a fly."

The soldier closed his eyes. With just a single second he was given, he looked back at his life. Surely, that was Orochi's mercy for him.

Fortunately, he didn't feel any pain.

"All hidden members of EXE are to attack. Dragoons, heavy tanks and assault aircrafts are to attack. Attack helicopters are to start sweep. Have bombers start the bombardment. Even just a little bit, earn some time."

Leisurely, Sougetsu walked away from where Orochi was.

With sounds of bombing in the distance, Sougetsu walked away swinging his arms as if he was wielding a baton, directing the orchestra.

However, soon enough he lost interest and shook his head.

"How disappointing... Orochi-kun can be called the strongest person in Valhalla, it can't be helped that he became strong since the Witch Hunt War, but I wanted the young ones to try harder. In the old days there was a bunch of strong people who could go against such cheat-level strength without relying on something like weapons."

Recalling the Witch Hunt War, Sougetsu was disappointed in the modern Inquisitors.

In the Witch Hunt War, the human side was vastly inferior in the early days. In front of the witches overwhelming power, the level of Inquisition's firearms was very low as compared to modern, and they were losing territory rapidly.

Still, they stood their ground because there were many geniuses that excelled among them.

Innovative fighter aircrafts Japan had developed and pilots with outrageous maneuvering skills. Commando troops with 200 members that have confronted 2000 sorcerers and prevailed in the lost kingdom. A finish sniper with a gift and his best friend. A genius engineer that had devised and developed the original Dragoon that works well even in the modern times. A man who succeeded in synthesising magical organisms and introduced Chimera troops into battle, the founder of Suginami, Trismegistos.

Thanks to existences like them, humanity managed to hold out until the Akashic Hazard occurred.

The enemy's introduction of dark elves. Lævateinn and Kusanagi Orochi. Mistilteinn and Kusanagi Mikoto. Even despite those existences that had a large impact, human side was able to win because their numbers were vast. Even at that time, there were hundred humans for every witch. And after surviving a world-wide catastrophe, they multiplied like highly-fertile cockroaches.

"It's been 150 years since then... it's no good unless humans fight after all. Spoiled by peace, humanity will be trampled by witches."

Looking up and raising both his hands he shook his head with a "good grief".

"You really are a scumbag from the bottom of your heart aren't you."

——The wind has wailed.

Sougetsu erased his expression and held out his hands in front.

Momentarily, Relic Eater 『Innocentius』 materialized. Sougetsu turned and rotated the musket like a baton and received the sword's point that was approaching from the front.

A tremendous metallic sound has rang out and the ground shook with impact.

Sougetsu stared at the face of a man who managed to launch a surprise attack at him.

Brightly shining blond hair. An intense yet frivolous expression, black clothing of a priest. And an irregular sword in a shape of a rapier.

While receiving the sword's point with Innocentius' barrel, Sougetsu tilted his head puzzled.

"...if I'm not wrong, you're the person who assaulted the mock battle tournament, right?"

"My name is Haunted. I have been aware of your existence for 150 years, but it is the first time for us to meet directly. No, truly... you are a person I have imagined you to be. The smell of a scumbag oozing from you is causing a disaster in my nose."

As Sougetsu snorted in boredom, Haunted assaulted him with a cold stare.

Neither of the two has laughed like they usually did.

"...I do not know much about you, but why am I so disgusted being told that by you?"

"Isn't it because we're both malicious humans? However, it's not cognate aversion, since I cannot understand your existence."

"Hmmm. I have not a slightest interest in you... do you need something? I'm in a hurry."

While pressing on each other, their lines of sight met.

Sougetsu acted coldly, but Haunted clearly filled his glare with murderous intent.

"I have heard of you from Orochi-san and Mother Goose. I also have participated in the Witch Hunt War 150 years ago, but it can't be helped that I didn't know of an inconspicuous existence like you. Back then, I had no interest in you."

"Oh. I see. I'd like it if you continued not to have interest in me."

"That won't do——at this point in time, you have become an existence that's a hindrance to me."

With a loud sound, Haunted inserted more strength into his sword. Unmoving, Sougetsu received the pressure coming from Haunted unmoving, like a stone statue.

"You love war, don't you."

"Well, indeed."

"I love it too. War is nice. Hope and despair intermingles and I can enjoy both with ease."

While continuing to glare at Sougetsu, Haunted furrowed his eyebrows.

His appearance full of anger was too human to be called that of a madman.

"——However, destruction is not good. There's no meaning in breaking everything. If you're wishing to wipe out both despair and hope, your existence becomes hindrance to me."

"...my arm is about to start hurting... if you're to speak to yourself, can you go somewhere else?"

"I do not expect you to understand. You who cannot understand human emotions, are a truly pathetic sight——a boring existence."

"...and?"

"You who intends to deprive me of paradise, will lose your life here."

Haunted parried Sougetsu's gun and jumping backwards he took distance from him.

After soundlessly landing on the ground, Haunted immediately clenched his beloved sword "Dáinsleif" in front of his chest. Raising the blade in front of his eyes he closed his eyes like a knight saying his vows.

On the opposite side Sougetsu lowered Innocentius' hammer and with a seemingly languid movement he aimed at Haunted.

Each of them expanded a magical circle, and the fight was about to begin——it was then.

Something has shook the air.

" "?!" "

With ringing in their ears, momentarily sound disappeared from the world.

Voices, wind, not even their own breathing could be heard.

What is it, Haunted and Sougetsu directed their line of sight towards where Orochi was fighting.

Something was coming.

The two, had an exactly same premonition.

After Orochi has butchered fifty EXE members equipped with Guillotine, he deformed Gungnir's shape into that of a Japanese sword as the reinforcements have appeared.

And while sheathing the sword, he sank his waist low.

"...where's Sougetsu."

《"North-northwest, 500 meters away in a straight line. He seems to be confronting Haunted."》

As Mother said that, the corners of Orochi's mouth distorted inside of the armor.

"That's helpful... I didn't think a day would come where I'm grateful to that pervert."

《"What shall we do?"》

As Mother awaited instructions, Orochi spoke.

"They're within range——trigger your grant. We'll do *that*."

《"...however, with my grant, your body will——"》

"One second is enough. If it's that much, I'll somehow manage."

《"....."》

"I leave the timing to you. Don't miss it."

Without waiting for Mother to acknowledge it, Orochi gripped the sheath.

And——

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style... Secret Art."

Taking a deep breath, he mustered all strength in his body.

Using Soumatou he increased brain processing speed, raising both reflexes and physical abilities to the limit.

Even as he reached the limits of a human, Orochi didn't release Soumatou.

For him, who had the body of a vampire, there was still more. He could move even faster.

What he imagined was sound. His own existence reaching the speed of sound. Although it would be impossible for a human to stand the speed of sound, with vampire's body it was possible with a very small margin.

However, it was not enough.

What he imagined next——was light.

He dreamed of it single-mindedly. Reaching the area mankind couldn't reach.

He could never reach it, and yet still reached out to it single-mindedly.

Not minding his body breaking. He wanted be to faster and faster.

Orochi's body made a crackling sound and blood flowed from the veins all over his body blowing up. Even after being subjected to Gungnir's strengthening, he still didn't have enough strength to reach it.

I don't care. In front. Ahead. Forward. Forward.

To the dazzling out of reach——to that area.

Reach, reach, reach, reach, reachreachreachre

——Reach!

Physics collapsed. Particles burst. World, stopped.

The fingertips of Orochi's outstretched hands faintly——touched the light.

He opened his eyes widely in the blindness, and he certainly has seen light he has dreamed of.

And——

"——Ama-no-Habakiri."

In the world in which sound and time disappeared, along with words of power, Orochi took a step forward.

The world has stopped. Time, has stopped.

The target was a Dragoon that loomed right in front of him.

Orochi unsheathed the sword while drawing a circle and slashed with the sword from above to the ground at the Dragoon's head.

And, at the moment blade hit the ground, Orochi cancelled Soumatou.

At that moment——any existence other than Orochi's has been blown into non-existence.

Haunted could clearly see light overflowing.

From the location Orochi was in, a tremendous shock wave was coming towards them.

As expected, even Haunted made a bitter smile.

"Now he's done it, that human nuclear weapon——"

Just before he could finish speaking, Haunted's body was swallowed in a the shockwave and disappeared.

And, Sougetsu too,

"That's why I told you I'm in a hurry."

Was exposed to the shockwave in defenseless state.

——The radius it had was 2 kilometers from the hypo-center.

Everything existing in that location was blown away.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style's Secret Art——Ama-no-Habakiri."

Devised by Orochi, a method to move the body at speed nearing that of light.

Surpassing limits of Soumatou, surpassing limits of the body, surpassing limits of mass, reaching the ultimate existence.

A blow released from that state, boasted of a destructive power against substance on the level of a nuclear weapon.

Probably, there was no existence that could withstand that blow.

The Glossary

"I am Herjann. I am Uzr. I am All Alfozr. I am Vizurr and therefore——" - The old Norse words in this chant have meanings of Herjann (Army), Ur (Wave), Alfozr (All Creation) and Vizurr (Destruction).

Chapter 4 - Highway Battle

After leaving the hostel, The Small Fry Platoon headed north once again.

The snow continued to fall without change. If anything, it's been worse then a day before. Of all times possible, it seemed to be the the highest amount of snow falling over the last ten years.

The wall of snow built up on both sides of the road was nearly three-meters tall.

After stopping the car at the branching, Ouka glared at the map along with Takeru who was in the passenger's seat.

On the route they have planned to use, there was a traffic sign warning it was blockaded by snow.

"This is bad... the route we had in reserve is closed to traffic too."

"With this much snow we have no choice... it might be longer but..."

Ouka looked towards Nagaru who was devouring sweets in the back seat.

"What do we do? It's far, but shall we take a detour?"

At Ouka's proposal, Nagaru went a deep "hmm" thinking of it.

"No, let's give up on detouring〜. As expected the scary pursuers should be on us soon, we don't have time for such leisure."

"...so we shouldn't have stayed in the hostel after all?"

"Boo〜, everyone recovered their strength and we were able to relax so it's fine〜."

Nagaru shook her body and puffed up her cheeks as she stared at Ouka.

"Then, the highway after all... there might be checkpoints, so it's quite dangerous."

"You're right. But even for Inquisition it's impossible to place checkpoints on all the roads, there should be many holes in the highway."

"...that does sound unlikely."

"Ah, Suginami-chan, I have a small request for you, is it fine?"

Unexpectedly, Nagaru called Ikaruga.

Ikaruga who was messing around with Usagi's boobs looked towards Nagaru with a blank look.

30 minutes later, the car carrying the Small Fry Platoon has been safely riding on the highway.

They could proceed smoothly on a maintained road, where only a thin layer of snow was lying. The difference between that and an ordinary road was obvious.

"...I haven't found any checkpoints so far. It's all right for the next 10 kilometers."

Ikaruga exchanged her seat with Takeru's, and from the passenger seat she reported to Ouka.

On her head was installed a helmet-type interface.

Inside, on the interface's screen, the road was projected up to 10 kilometers ahead. The video was being taken from the sky. Using the sentry bot that was previously supporting Usagi on the battlefield, Ikaruga carried out reconnaissance on the road.

Ouka who was driving was relieved, and put a hand on her chest.

"As expected of you, Suginami. You're much more reliable than car navigation or President."

"Fuee〜, I'm clearly being treated like an idiot〜."

Ignoring Nagaru who was munching on sweets in the seat behind, Ouka followed Ikaruga's instructions.

"At this rate we'll arrive at the destination in an hour. Everyone, prepare protection against cold and climbing equipment."

"Wait... something's strange."

At Ikaruga's disturbing words, Ouka raised her eyebrows and asked.

"What is it?"

"It might be because of snow, but I can't see any car on the road other than ours. Even though we have entered highway five minutes ago, I didn't see a single one. It's strange that there isn't even a single snow plow either..."

When Ikaruga anxiously placed ah and on her chin, Ouka narrowed her eyes sharply.

Nagaru who was in the back seat has rose up as well and unexpectedly leaned towards the driver's seat.

"Sorry, can you lend me a map for a moment?"

Ouka took out the map from the dashboard and passed it to Nagaru.

After spreading the map on her knees, Nagaru removed a magic pen from her breast pocket and opened it with her mouth, then hurriedly drew the route on the map towards their destination.

Mari who was sitting next to her was amazed by the speed Nagaru drew on the map to the point of laughter, and she stared both at the map and Nagaru alternating between them. Unusually serious, Nagaru fully focused on the work.

"...what are you doing?"

"Mm... I'm checking the route we have taken up until now."

Hee〜, Mari muttered while looking at the increasing number of points on the map.

Although at first she was dazed, after starting to understand what Nagaru is worried about, her expression has stretched out.

"...t-this is!"

"So that's it〜..."

Nagaru put away the pen and spread out the map as to let everyone see.

Ouka and Ikaruga glanced at the map.

The points on the map were clearly...

"——We were led onto the highway. Probably, enemy has anticipated us. It's a trap."

"I-if they anticipated us, does that mean our destination has been found out?!"

Usagi raised her hand to her mouth and paled.

"That's hard to believe. I don't think enemy knows where our home base is, and they shouldn't be able to pin point us to the level of closing the roads we take, most likely we were followed."

"Followed... so that we lead them to dissidents base?"

Mari guessed, and Nagaru nodded in agreement.

"W-why were we found? We didn't contact anyone a single time, and didn't use any electronic equipment."

"I don't know how did they do it. I can think of several possibilities, but we can no longer head for our destination. For the time being we need to do something about enemy. We'll get off the highway at once and——"

"——No, it seems too late for that."

Ouka said interrupting Nagaru as she looked into the rear-view mirror.

Everyone looked towards the back at once.

It was a straight road without any curves.

Far in the distance, there were three small points.

"——Inquisition's military vehicles!"

Takeru opened the window and leaned outside.

It's been only a few seconds since they noticed they are being chased, but the vehicles have already closed onto them to the point where they can be seen.

"...everyone prepare to fight! Ouka, can you shake them off somehow?!"

"I'll try!"

As instructed to by Takeru, Ouka stepped on the accelerator.

The engine growled and they have rapidly accelerated. Because there were chains wrapped around the tires, the car started violently vibrating.

"Takeru, can you see enemy vehicle's models?"

"Eh-umm... b-blue Jeep? I-I can tell it's a four-wheeler!"

"Be more specific!"

"S-sorry, I'm not familiar with cars..."

"——TeRX-2000, made by Alchemist corp. It's strong on curves, so it's better to escape straight.

Ikaruga who has been monitoring the situation through the sentry bot on the sky has mentioned the vehicle model instead of Takeru.

"As for horsepower, we're evenly matched. This car too is an improved, latest military model that's been disguised, it's quick despite the frame. It has bulletproof glasses too."

For some reason, Nagaru puffed her chest up proudly.

Ikaruga quietly assessed the situation and instructed Ouka.

"We're better in the snow. For now, go at full speed, I'll tell you when to curve."

Following Ikaruga's instructions, Ouka pressed on the accelerator more strongly.

Because of the G's from the acceleration, Mari and Usagi screamed.

"Gyaa! The car chase on the snow should stay in mangaa!"

"I-I-I'm w-weak to roller-coasteerss!"

As the two hugged each other while looking like they are about to cry, Ouka gradually raised the speed.

When she checked the mirror, she saw the vehicles which were closing the distance, move further again.

"There's a curve 300 meters in front. We'll manage."

"At this rate we'll pull out, then get out of the highway all at once. We'll have to hide the car and consider moving on foot...nn?!"

It was about the immediate future. When Ouka thought of a plan, but the vehicle visible in the rearview mirror didn't waste a single moment.

A magical circle and blue particles seemed to have come out from the vehicle.

Moment after——the car has demonstrated an abnormal acceleration.

Ouka was familiar with that magical circle and acceleration.

"——《Highway Fairy》?!"

She raised a voice in shock.

《Highway Fairy》. A charm that the Small Fry Platoon has previously confiscated from criminals. They never thought Inquisition would use them like this.

"Ngh, Inquisitors shouldn't embezzle damn Magical Heritagesssssssssss!"

A moment before they reached the curve, Ouka pressed on the brakes and turned to the right while screaming angrily.

It was the worst case, the road was covered with ice.

" " "Gyaaaaaaaaa!" " "

While Takeru's, Mari's and Usagi's scream resounded inside, Small Fry Platoon's car slipped grandly.

It seemed like it will start rotating, but it continued to drew an arc right onto the guardrail.

However, Ouka changed gear and stepped on the break, and through ingenious steering wheel's operation, she finished the curve on the brink of collision.

Immediately after rebuilding balance, the car ran at full throttle once again.

Ikaruga instinctively raised the helmet's visor and whistled.

"Wheeew, what's up with that driving technique! Right now, I feel like embracing you! I'll give you my virginity!"

"Even if you say that twice, it's impossible! Come on Suginami, concentrate on the Sentry Bot!"

"J-just now the car's movement were like that of a skaters..."

"Upgh... I feel like barfing..."

"M-my dead grandfather i-is smiling to me..."

Falling from the seats with the seat belts still on, almost everyone's face cramped in pain.

The road was going straight again. However, the enemy's approaching car was affected by 《Highway Fairy》 and it entered the curve at perfect angle.

"At this rate...!"

Ouka started showing impatience as she stepped on the accelerator.

That's when, Nagaru started laughing in the rear seat.

"Fu fu fu, no worries. I have a secret plan as well."

Acting arrogantly, Nagaru pulled out a piece of paper from her breast pocket.

"——I have this! Three《Highway Fairy》instant charms I have snatched from Inquisition!"

"That's nothing to be proud of!!"

Ouka immediately retorted, but Nagaru ignored it and raised her arm with the charm towards the ceiling.

"Hi-Yo, Silver!"

And, she swung down with all her strength onto the floor with the charm.

Momentarily, a blue magical circle was deployed, 《Highway Fairy》 magic was deployed.

.....

Or not.

"....."

".....?"

".....??"

".....???"

Everyone fell silent.

Nagaru blinked repeatedly and pulled off the charm that was sticking to the floor. After picking it up, she fluttered with it in the air and smiled wryly, scratching her cheek with a finger.

"Sorry〜, this car is made with anti-magical material so it won't receive the magic〜."

While they had a short comical exchange, the cars have closed onto them from both sides.

Ouka tried to shake them off somehow, but because of the sustained 《Highway Fairy》's effect it was impossible. Everyone in the rear seat picked up guns and prepared for combat.

"Lapis, you ready?"

" " "You're useless!" " "

Preparing for the fight as well, Takeru asked Lapis who sat on top of his knees.

"You and me can jump into enemy's car and stall them. We should be able to do that much in Witch Hunter form."

"....."

"...Lapis?"

He once again called out to Lapis who was staying silent. Lapis slightly shook her head in response.

"I don't recommend it."

"?! Why? It's an emergency you know?!"

"I am unable to disclose a detailed explanation. It's an error."

Takeru didn't think that she would say 'error' even at a time like this.

It seemed like she was upset by something again,

"I'm really... sorry."

But since she apologized, Takeru started thinking there must have been a different reason.

However, right now they didn't have time to think about that. Their car was already sandwiched between Inquisition's, and there was a car behind them cutting off their escape route.

Ouka glared at the window of the vehicle on their right side. Although it was smoked and enemy wasn't visible, the glass slowly has been lowered and——a handgun has peeked out.

A gunshot rang out. The bullet bit into the glass aiming directly for her forehead.

"Overpressure ammunition...! Even bulletproof glass won't hold out for long!"

After Ouka shouted, Kanaria who was silent up until now opened the skylight on the top.

"...Kana will go."

Holding guns with strangely long magazines, Kanaria climbed up to the car's roof. Ikaruga tried to stop her, but Takeru placed a hand on her shoulder. Takeru strongly pat her shoulder to relay that only Kanaria is capable of doing it now

"Kanaria, I leave it to you."

"Nn."

"Also, try not to kill them as much as possible."

Kanaria grimaced and glared at Takeru from the gap in the skylight.

Takeru returned her glare straight, Kanaria immediately turned around and clicked her tongue.

"You're too soft Takeru——《Víðópnir》

Lævateinn she was carrying on her back has sparkled for a moment, and a fairy-like wings have appeared behind Kanaria.

Immediately after, Kanaria kicked off the roof with abandon.

The car Small Fry Platoon was riding has dented in.

At the same time as she jumped, Kanaria flapped the wings on her back and plunged forward.

——**bvuunn**

Along with a buzz like that of an insect, Kanaria moved in front of the cars.

However, after 20 meters, she has inverted her body towards the cars.

And then she jumped onto the vehicle on the right of the one Takeru and the others were.

She outstretched the sub-machine guns she was holding forward and squeezed the triggers.

A rapid-fire with overpressure bullets hit the enemy's car head-on. Enemy vehicle's windshield has been filled with white cracks.

In addition to that, Kanaria rammed into the windshield in a flying-kick manner.

Kanaria's body passed through the glass and she entered the car.

The car on their right has shook strongly. Surely, Kanaria has been rampaging inside.

After a few seconds, the car started spinning. On the verge of it hitting the wall, Kanaria opened the door and jumped outside again.

She looked like a fairy holding a gun.

Using similar modus operandi, Kanaria overturned the car in the back.

However, when she tried to jump out of the fallen car, the skylight of the vehicle on their left has opened and an Inquisitor with a rocket launcher has appeared.

She'll be late. If the rocket hits the car as it is, Kanaria will get caught up in the explosion. The moment Takeru thought so,

"——《Aurora Field》!"

Mari exposed her upper body through the skylight and triggered magic.

The car running right beside them on the left has decelerated as if it entered water and after losing balance it fell over and started to roll.

The space inside of the light has weight applied on it which further increased the impact car has taken. Since the magic was activated to match the position and speed of the car, the people inside wouldn't have realized disturbance if not for tracking Kanaria's actions.

Mari stretched herself out of the window, grabbed Kanaria's hands who flew over and dragged her inside of the car.

"You're too reckless, are you that durable?"

"...it's nothing."

"A-as expected... that was dangerous was it not, right Kusanagi?"

"...yeah."

Takeru dully responded to Usagi, and anxiously stared at Lapis on top of his knees.

Even as he wondered what might be the cause, he couldn't come up with anything. His bond with Lapis should have deepened in Magic Academy, it would be strange if he were to be rejected by his partner now.

Is it jealousy towards the platoon members? ...that's probably not it.

Despite all, Takeru and Lapis were together for a long time, there was hardly any time they weren't together.

She wouldn't reject going into Witch Hunter form because of something like jealousy.

There's some other reason...

"Everyone, sorry for not reading the mood but——it seems like it isn't over yet."

Ouka, the driver, spoke in a heavy tone.

When everyone stared towards the back once again, they could see a new vehicle approach at high speed.

"Oh come on! Inquisition's really persistent! Fine, even at this range I can use my magic——"

"Give up on that. That's different from the bunch from before."

After her proposal was rejected by Ouka, Mari squinted as she stared at approaching car. The car's model was same as the ones from before.

However, there was a human figure on the roof. The figure flapped its coat, standing on the roof without any resistance to the wind.

Seeing a black uniform under the coat, Mari was horrified.

Sweat ran down Ouka's cheek.

"It's EXE. Moreover, it's not the rookies using mass-produced models. She's..."

She squinted, focusing herself.

"EXE's vice captain."

Clutching the handle strongly, Ouka stepped on the accelerator.

"——Bingo. I'm a genius after all〜."

Making a daunting pose on top of the car, Magnolia laughed in front of the target.

Gou sat in the driver's seat and Kagerou was sitting in the passenger seat beside.

"...Mag-san...why...did you think the children would... go to old Aomori?"

"It's just many years of experience and intuition. Their destination——is probably old Hokkaido."

Ruins of old Hokkaido. During the late Witch Hunt War, Hokkaido had almost vanished, annihilated by Dark Elves' magic.

Even so, not the entirety of its land was lost.

The entire area was swallowed by the Sanctuary, but a several islands still existed.

"That bunch is a hybrid organization that has gathered dissidents of various organizations. Magic and AntiMagic have teamed up, it wouldn't be surprising if they had transfer magic and barrier equipment Valhalla can use. Their activities have intensified after Hojishiro appeared, but it's an organization that's existed for a long time already."

"...then...they've been hiding in Hokkaido's Sanctuary...have they..."

"Well, we can hear the truth from the bunch after we catch them. Chasing the bunch in this damn cold... my body has dulled, I'll take them on for a lil'."

When Magnolia extended her hands, bright red magic appeared under her feet and particles of magical power have overflowed.

And, the particles have concentrated in the vicinity of Magnolia's hands, shaping two handguns.

Two small, scarlet-colored revolvers.

On the surface of the guns 《The Malleus Maleficarum III “Bloody Mary”》 was carved in.

Magnolia performed a gunspin and poised with the Relic Eater "Bloody Mary".

She licked her lips with her tongue and aimed the muzzle of the gun she held in her right hand at the sky.

And she squeezed the trigger five times in total.

Although five gunshots have sounded, nothing was fired from the muzzle. Instead, red lightning has appeared from the cylinder.

Smoke raised from the gun's muzzle, Magnolia slowly lowered it and this time aimed at the gun in front.

And then——

"Now, the game of tag has barely started."

——Magnolia pulled the trigger, firing six rounds of live ammunition.

"!!——It's coming! Everyone hold onnnn!"

Ouka shouted and turned the handle with abandon.

At the same time, from the vehicle in the rear something of reddish-brown color was unleashed.

.....——UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

A spine-chilling roar. It was as if an enormous dragon opened its mouth.

The Dragon plunged straight, aiming at their car.

Ouka avoided the dragon without wings, shaped like a snake with her brilliant driving skills.

"W-what's that!"

"A dragon?!"

Seeing the dragon built with magical power pass beside, Takeru and Kanaria were amazed.

If that thing were to hit them, even their car made from anti-magical materials would have been erased.

Even Ikaruga, who was the only one keeping her composure in the car has grimaced, raising the helmet's visor.

"That thing can't be fired so rapidly can it. After we pass through the hairpin curve ahead, there's an exit from the highway 500 meters further. We should——"

"——No, avoiding that is impossible, it's not over yet!"

Ha? Everyone made the same expression.

Immediately after a disturbing sound hung over, front the front——once again, a roar resounded.

The dragon was coming from the road ahead, after doing a U-turn.

"It's coming back! It has automatic tracking!"

Once again, Ouka turned the handle to the side. She avoided the dragon's rush for the second time.

However, this time the Dragon grazed their car and blew away the trunk door.

A scream echoed inside of the car.

Propelled by the impact, the car rotated. Although it was severely scratched by the guardrail, Ouka somehow rebuilt their posture.

"Any more than this is impossible...! The car won't hold out!"

The car started to malfunction and vibrate violently.

"I-I'll try to do something with my protective magic...!"

Mari started to weave protection magic and expanding it.

However, Nagaru who was looking at the map placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Mari-chan, not protective magic, use that flabby magic from before."

"《Aurora Field》? It won't be able block enemy's attack."

Leaving Mari confused, Nagaru held Usagi's hand next.

"Usagi-chan, you have a gun that doesn't need footing and doesn't have any recoil right? From the skylight, I want you to shoot it squarely ahead of us when I tell you to."

"? W-why do such thing."

"It's fine, please〜."

Even as she raised both of her hands and pleaded, Nagaru's eyes weren't laughing.

Just as she was told to, Usagi pulled out the launcher and extended it outside of the skylight.

This time Nagaru moved to the driver's seat and whispered into Ouka's ear.

"Ouka-chan continue straight, full throttle. Do not turn on the curves, cut straight ahead."

"?! B-but..."

"Believe me."

To the point it was unimaginable after seeing her carefree attitude, Nagaru's tone has turned imposing.

Ouka had a lot of questions, but she didn't have the leisure for that at the moment.

The proof of that was.

"It's coming back... it's raising up this time, it's coming from the sky! Predicting its path is an out this time!"

After listening to Takeru's report, who extended his head from the window, Ouka clenched her teeth.

"〜〜〜Ah screw this! Fuck traffic rules!"

"That's good〜! Go go go!"

As if to cheer on her from behind, Nagaru hit the seat.

Ouka stepped on the accelerator to the maximum and changed the gear to next one.

It was the nitro boost they left for when its needed the most.

The engine spew flames and a strong G force was applied to the car. While withstanding wind pressure and the G's, Usagi continued to aim the recoilless rifle from the skylight.

The turn could be seen. At this rate they absolutely couldn't turn, in the first place, this car didn't intend to turn.

In the middle of a situation akin to a chicken race, Nagaru yelled.

"——Now! Shoot the wall!"

As she was told to, Usagi faced the front and fired with the gun straight ahead.

The trajectory slightly deviated, but the grenade landed on the wall and blew away the guardrail.

After she finished shooting, Takeru grabbed her and dragged her back into the car.

"OKAYY! Plunge into it as you are!"

The Dragon approached from the sky.

The car was accelerating, but the Dragon was faster.

The distance from the Dragon was 10 meters, 5 meters, 3 meters

——1 meter.

The Dragon composed of magical power opened its mouth.

" " " " " "UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" " " " " "

Everyone other than Ikaruga and Lapis cried out in a same manner, and immediately after.

The car rushed right through the explosion.

And——pierced right through.

After destroying the wall with recoilless gun, they slipped outside. The Dragon had barely missed its mark, and at the same time as it brushed by the ceiling of the car it ran out of magical power.

"Yess, we avoid——ed?!"

Ouka let out a voice of delight and surprise at the same time.

The car that has jumped out of the highway started to dive like a jet coaster.

The gravity inside of the car disappeared.

They were falling.

The screams resounded again. Takeru embraced Usagi and Lapis, withstood a feeling as if his heart was rising up and braced himself to the shock.

After falling off the cliff, the car was going headlong into the forest that was buried under snow.

It seemed like they would hit the ground head-on but,

"——Mari-chan!"

In response to Nagaru's instruction, Mari invoked the magic.

《Aurora Field》. It grants mass to magical particles of Aurora property within the range, reducing speed and impact.

Understanding Nagaru's intentions, Mari deployed the magic at the landing point.

——**gakun**! A shock assaulted the car.

On the verge of crashing, the car slowed under the influence of 《Aurora Field》 and made an emergency landing on top of the snow.

"...w-w-we're saved....?"

In the crowded car, Takeru ensured everyone's safety.

"Usagi, Lapis, are you okay?"

In response to his concerned voice, Lapis nodded in silence.

On the other hand, Usagi was trembling strongly and raised her face full of tears.

"K-Ku-Kusanagii... I- I'm... I am..."

"Seems like you're all right..."

"I-I'm not awright at all...euu...I p-peed myself...a little."

For the time being he put aside the confession Usagi made while hyperventilating and checked the status of the other members.

Nagaru seemed to have slipped off from the seat belt and her head rammed into the crotch of Ouka who was sitting in the driver's seat. Since Kanaria didn't have a seat belt from the beginning, her face was stuck in Ikaruga's chest. Ouka and Ikaruga had their faces buried in airbags and didn't move.

It was an outrageous situation, but surprisingly everyone was intact.

Takeru suddenly exhaled, and slipped from his seat in disarray.

"Ouchch... I hurt my hip a little〜."

After they dragged out Nagaru through the window as she spoke things an old woman would, Small Fry Platoon successfully left the car.

They have survived for the time being, but the situation still wasn't turned around.

It was only a matter of time until the pursuers caught up to them.

Fortunately, the snowing weakened, and it wasn't a situation where walking through it would be hard. They were wearing coats, but that was their only consolation.

"...although their protection against cold was blown away, Saionji's rifle and Vlad seem to be fine."

Usagi received the rifle from Ouka and hung its belt on her shoulder. Since she couldn't bring the recoilless rifle she held, it had to be left behind on top of the snow.

Nagaru pulled out the map from the car and raised her eyebrows.

"There's still quite distance on feet〜, but there's no other choice but to walk. Mari-chan, is there any chance of you making a barrier against wind and cold?"

"Leave it to me. It's a piece of cake."

"All right let's hurry. It's okay, it's okay〜, if cold doesn't get to us it'll be easy〜♪."

Carrying a rucksack too big for her body, laughing brightly, Nagaru started walking in the front.

Mari and Usagi, Kanaria and Ikaruga followed her while complaining.

At this carefree mood, everyone involuntarily spilled a smile.

"She's someone with no tension... but for some reason, she feels reliable."

"Yeah, many of the people who have a higher standing in this country are weirdos, but she truly is like that."

Ouka floated a wry smile as well, staring at Nagaru's back.

"Compared to that... I'm completely useless..."

After leaving driving, navigation and combat to his comrades, Takeru slumped in disappointment.

Ouka sighed and hit his back strongly.

"Oww!"

"You've fought a lot until now. Just this time leave it to us. Worry do not, you're a splendid weirdo who won't lose to President."

"T-thanks... hey wait, is that your follow-up?"

"We all have become this brazen thanks to you. Puff up your chest with pride."

"...I don't know if I'm being praised or scolded here..."

She released the hand from his shoulder and started walking.

"It's all right. Everyone's with you. No worries."

After hearing Ouka's words, Takeru nodded.

They have surely gained experience on the battle field that allowed them to break through anything now. It was unthinkable for Ouka to act so with such a leisure in the past.

Takeru stared at the back of each member who were walking in front.

Compared to their original formation, it seemed like everyone's back became larger. They have surpassed carnage beyond what an ordinary test platoon could have.

It wasn't that they wanted to become like this. If there was peace, it definitely wouldn't have turned out like this. But, as the captain, he was proud that their back have stretched.

...everyone has become strong.

Takeru chased after everyone's backs. This time, as not to be left behind. In order to protect them as he always did.

"——Aww〜, no matter how you look at it, you're being too carefree〜. You stay at hostel, you tryin' to move on foot〜. Ain't ya lackin' a sense of crisis?"

They could hear a voice from above.

The moment everyone in the location raised their faces, three shadows fell in front.

Three surprise attackers. It could be seen at a glance that they were EXE members.

Their Relic Eaters had executed Witch Hunter forms and their bodies were wrapped in armor.

Everyone braced themselves, entering combat readiness.

So they were EXE members after all...!

Even in the extreme cold, cold sweat ran down Takeru's back.

There were three opponents. A small boy wearing a scarlet armor. A gray giant reminiscent of rock. A gloomy woman reminiscent of a bluish black shadow.

All of them were in Witch Hunter form.

On the platoon's side, in addition to Lapis' refusal to enter Witch Hunter form for an unknown reason, they couldn't use Ouka's Vlad. Usagi who was a sniper couldn't shoot satisfactory with a heavy snow pouring down.

The only ones who could put up a decent fight was Kanaria and Mari.

The situation is the worst.

While looking at Lapis who was silent right beside him, Takeru thought of what to do.

Since the enemy attacked them with full force, it didn't seem like they were trying to catch them alive.

He wanted to avoid combat, but how do they escape to get away?

As Takeru continued to think, Ouka who took a defensive posture glared at the scarlet boy.

"Magnolia troop... normally you hardly do any work, I never thought you would become our pursuers."

After being spoken to sarcastically, the boy scratched his temple with the gun's muzzle and made a condescending smile towards Ouka.

"Hey hey, don't make it seem like we're good for nothing. We're the part of EXE that works behind the scenes... we're properly workin' ya know? For example, we disposin' of traitors?"

Spinning the small revolvers she held in both hands, Magnolia joked.

"It's Chairman's order, don't think badly of me... well, that's what I'd like to say but I'm fairly fired-up for this. I really can't get around the fact that a mere test platoon is Chairman's favorite."

"...what are your intentions for us..."

"We've orders to kill Kusanagi, Suginami and Nikaido. Well, 't should be fine to bring ya back naked and prostratin'."

Magnolia proposed with a "How about it?".

All the platoon members have taken their arms up in silence.

It was a foolish question. They were prepared to fight right from the beginning.

Magnolia stopped to spin her guns and smiled happily.

"Okaay, your reply's as expected! Kagerou, Gou."

"...yes, Captain..."

"....."

"Listen, I don't mind if you tear a limb or two from the capture targets. I'll forgive it. As you wished——tear them limb from limb."

It was a desperate situation. Ouka moved in front as if to protect everyone and clenched her fist.

"Everyone run away... I'll hold them up——"

The moment Ouka showed a spirit of self-sacrifice.

**slap*, Mari hit Ouka's head.

"That hurt! What are you doing?!"

Ouka raised a voice full of blame, but Mari silently moved in front of her.

Kanaria followed her, unsheathing her sword.

"You all fall back... I'll take them on."

"Run away. You'll be a hindrance."

Mari and Kanaria have confronted Magnolia and the others.

The two's backs were reliable.

However, Takeru couldn't acknowledge it. It wasn't that he didn't trust those two's strength. It was too dangerous to separate in this snow.

And they finally reached this far.

They absolutely couldn't separate.

Usagi, Ikaruga and Ouka seemed to feel the same, and everyone moved in front.

Even if it was suicidal, everyone fighting together was a better choice.

But, that's when.

——Someone fired the recoilless gun straight into the sky.

A grenade soared to the sky pulling a trail of smoke behind it and exploded in the air.

Everyone's gaze was drawn behind all at once.

Lit up by the flames of explosion, holding the recoilless gun was an unexpected person.

"Fuh, it'll be troubling if you forget about me?"

Putting a tabacco-like sweet into her mouth, Hojishiro Nagaru threw the recoilless gun onto the ground.

"Everyone run away——leave this place to me."

It was too unexpected, everyone froze, including the enemy.

When the tense mood was ruined, Ouka grimaced painfully.

"...President... don't go with the flow and participate. No one is expecting anything of you..."

"Ehh, harsh! Onei-san is hurt, she was being serious!"

"We're fine! Commander should get back! If you die all will be for nothing!"

Ignoring Ouka's persuasion, Nagaru rudely moved towards Magnolia and the others.

"It's okay, it's okay. Leave it to me. It's cold so you all should cluster up together in one spot～♪. Look, there～. That mountain in front of us, its beautiful with all the snow piled up on it～. You can leisurely spend your time watching the mountain as I fight～."

Waving her hand, she spoke something of an unknown meaning.

Mountain, what is she suddenly on about——?

Although everyone made a completely stunned expression, Takeru alone who was familiar with mountains from an early age noticed the sound.

He noticed mainly thanks to Nagaru's words.

Mountain. Snow. Clustering up in one spot.

And——the strange sound he could hear faintly.

Takeru raised a hand preventing Ouka from stopping Nagaru.

"Wait, let's do as she says. Everyone gather in one spot."

"W-why?"

"It's fine, hurry up while it's still not exposed..."

After saying so in low voice, Takeru casually gathered everyone in one place.

And, after whispering orders into Mari's and Kanaria's ears, Takeru waited. Nagaru alone has confronted the enemy.

"...what's this farce. Why are you, the one with the least fighting force comin' out in front?"

"Naw～, look, once in a while I need to show that I can do something as their senior～. Vice-Captain should know what I'm talking about right～?"

Laughing care-freely, Nagaru stood unmoving about five meters away from Magnolia and rubbed her hands together.

That obsequious attitude must have annoyed Magnolia, who directed her muzzle towards Nagaru.

Nagaru exaggeratedly raised her arms, calming that she's harmless.

"Wait wait, let's calm down for a moment～. Let's settle it by talking it out～."

"Talk it out...? We're not as soft as to negotiate with the dissidents' top. We were ordered to kill you."

"Ah～, it might be so but, if we tried to kill each other here, we would both wipe each other out I think. That's why, we should withdraw for now, there's not much time."

Hearing Nagaru's words, Magnolia started to convulse.

"...withdraw? Even though there's such a clear difference in fighting force, you think you're able to fight equally against us?"

"Fighting might be out of question, but a disaster might be possible〜."

Hearing how Nagaru underestimated them, Magnolia made a ridiculing smile.

However, a blood vessel appeared on her temple.

"Heee... ain't that fine... yer more foolish than I thought, interesting, Hojishiro Nagaru. Try doing it then...!"

"Nn〜 rather——I've already did it."

She shrugged and smiled towards Magnolia.

Magnolia made a puzzled expression, that moment——

"?!"

From the mountain towering behind her, a thundering has resounded.

Next, was a roar like that of falling rocks, intense rumbling.

Everyone's line of sight was drawn towards the mountain.

After squinting, they saw a white haze crawl on the mountain's surface moving towards them.

Magnolia looked towards Nagaru, her expression cramped up.

"...no way you...!"

"The number one thing you shouldn't do in the mountains, is making loud noises——that's common sense, Boy."

Without a doubt——that was an avalanche.

It was coming at them with a breakneck speed!

"Nh———!"

Magnolia aimed her gun at Nagaru and squeezed the trigger.

Predicting it beforehand, Takeru invoked Soumatou and moved in front of Nagaru all at once.

At the same time as he unsheathed the sword, he slashed the scarlet magical bullet fired from the muzzle.

"Ghh...!"

The moment he parried the magical bullet, the sword made from adamantium broke and was blown away. Because if the bullet's power he was only able to shift the bullet's trajectory, unable to completely nullify it. It's speed wasn't that big, but the power was ridiculously big.

It was reckless to fight with someone in Witch Hunter form with just his flesh and bone.

Takeru forced all his bodily strength to the limit, grasped Nagaru's collar and jumped towards where his comrades were gathered together.

At the same time as they dived to their original position, Magnolia continued to fire.

All the released magical bullets were deflected by Kanaria.

"...you rat bastard!"

As Magnolia glared at her in rage, Nagaru who was being held by Takeru has stuck out her tongue and pulled her eyelid with a finger.

Nagaru had predicted that an avalanche would occur. After the recoilless gun's grenade hit the wall at high speed, the sound of snow shifting could be heard. The deciding factor was the grenade shot into the sky. An avalanche could occur after just one person raising a loud voice. After two explosions resounding, it was a certainty.

The avalanche immediately reached them.

"Mari!"

"——Roger!"

Momentarily, an aurora-colored barrier has wrapped all their comrades. Magnolia and the others were swallowed by the avalanche.

"Everyone, hold each other and don't let go!"

At the same time as Mari yelled, the avalanche has hit the barrier.

Even if it was snow, the avalanche wasn't soft. The impact at the time of contact was no different from being hit by an iron wall at speeds of 200kmph.

Mari affixed a barrier, protecting the platoon from the avalanche.

The muddy stream of snow flowed outside of the barrier at high speed.

"Absolutely do not leave the barrier! It's easy to be blown away to the outside!"

From the front. In the direction Magnolia and the others were, something has struck along with the avalanche.

——It was the gray giant. Gou.

Riding on the avalanche's flow, the man clad in armor to the top of his head has struck the barrier.

"Ngh, don't look down on my magical power!"

Mari strengthened the barrier using the maximum output of magical power.

However——despite that, the giant's body slipped through the barrier which didn't put up any resistance.

The giant's fist has closed onto the face of startled Mari.

Although Kanaria managed to change the fist's trajectory in the nick of time with Lævateinn, she was unable to suppress the giant body's rush.

The gathered Small Fry Platoon was blown away by the giant body outside of the barrier.

And like that, everyone has been swallowed by the waves of snow.

The Glossary

Víðópnir (ヴイドフニル) - It's written as (世界鳥の羽根) meaning "Wings of the World Bird".

Chapter 5 - Battle on the Snow

Feeling stinging cold on her body, Ouka woke up.

Her entire view was dyed in pure white. She barely managed to breathe in, but it seemed like cold and powdery snow would enter her lungs.

She was completely buried under the snow, unable to tell which way was up and which was down. Ouka did her best as not to panic and first confirmed what of her body could move.

Both legs, right arm, left arm... her left hand, was grasping something.

Judging by the feel of it, that would be someone else's hand.

Ouka put a little bit of snow into her mouth, after it dissolved into water because of her body temperature, she opened her mouth again.

Water dripped downwards from her lips.

That result meant she was lying face down.

She turned her body upwards and started moving her body to gradually push the snow aside. Expanding the space little by little, she crawled up through the snow.

A while after that, she has passed through the entirety of snow and saw the sky.

Making sure her body doesn't sink in, Ouka carefully moved out of the snow.

She breathed in oxygen into her lungs, without any time to feel relieved she started to dig in the snow.

After digging about two meters deep, she found the person whose hand she was grasping just a while ago.

A hat and a muffler. It was Mari.

Ouka dragged Mari's body out from under the snow and slapped her awake.

"Nikaido, hey! Wake up, Nikaido!"

No matter how many times she hit her, there was no reaction.

Ouka moved her ear right next to Mari's mouth and then directly pressed it against her chest. Although Mari's heart was beating, she wasn't breathing.

Without any hesitation, Ouka pinched Mari's nose and overlapped her lips with hers.

She injected oxygen into Mari's lungs, moved her mouth away and inhaled once again. After repeating it three times, Mari has finally came back to life.

The moment she made an eye contact with Ouka, Mari coughed.

Seeing Mari coughing, Ouka stroked her own chest in relief.

Mari turned blue and faced down , she puts her hands and knees on the snow.

"...are you okay? Any injuries?"

"...uu...ehuuu... **sniff**."

"It hurts so much to make you cry?! Is there a fracture——"

While Ouka was worried about her body, large tears trickled down from Mari's eyes.

"By berstt giss azzz (My first kiss was)〜〜〜〜〜!"

Her first words after revival were way too strange.

"Damn you, it's not time for that now!!"

"Uehhh〜〜〜〜nn! Why was it Ootori Ouka of all people〜〜〜〜! Even though it was my firsttt〜〜〜! And I already decided to give it to Takeruu〜〜〜〜〜!"

Mari wept for real.

Ouka blushed faintly and pointed at Mari in a hurry.

"O-obviously it doesn't count! It's lifesaving! It doesn't count, no way!"

"Uu, uu, **sniff**... doesn't count? Reallyy? Really for reall?"

"O-of course, if not for that even I would be asham——"

As Ouka's and Mari's silly debate on the first kiss continued, there was a firm sound of someone stepping on the snow in their immediate vicinity.

In the middle of piercing cold and falling snow, a figure barely lifting its legs from the ground has walked towards them.

Black hair with hints of blue, armor of the same color. The person who exuded an aura which could be called gruesome, aimed the muzzle of a short gun with a big muzzle which made it look similar to a trumpet at them.

And her special characteristic, her long, long bangs.

Neither her eyes nor mouth could be seen, hidden behind the bangs.

"...oh...I'm glad...you survived...Ouka-san..."

Being called by her name, Ouka went "Ughh", genuinely disgusted.

"...i-if you died with just that...mom...wouldn't be able to face Dad again... I'm really, really g-glad you're alive…"

Ufufufufufufufufufufufufufufufufufu... The woman placed a hand on her mouth and laughed eerily.

Although she almost missed it, Mari started to alternate between looking at Ouka and the woman's face.

"Mom she says... m-mom?! Your mother?!!"

"You're wrong! No, that's how it is for the time being but... s-she's my adoptive mother."

"Eh... so she's Chairman's wife?! This thing?!"

Raising a bewildered cry, Mari pointed at the woman.

Still continuing her "ufufu" laughter, the woman bowed, lifting the edge of her skirt.

"Ootori...Kagerou is my name...Sougetsu-sama's wife! And so... p-pleased to make your acquaintance."

She accented the word 'wife' very strongly. The honorifics she used gave them a really bad feeling, moreover, she continued to laugh eerily making her seem like a ghost from a horror movie.

Although there was tension in the air, Mari whispered to Ouka.

"...is she seriously that handsome scumbag's wife? It feels as if she crawled out from a well..."

"From what I've heard, at first she was Chairman's stalker. She was so insistent he finally signed the marriage registration form, feeling it too much a hassle to refuse or something... I-I don't get it myself."

Seeing an extremely difficult expression on Ouka's face, Mari decided not to pursue it any further.

Kagerou froze while still bowing and only tilted her head by 90° and stared at Ouka. Her bangs shook, and round eyeballs akin to a black crystal peeked from behind the bangs.

"Ouka-san, Mom is very sad... why didn't you listen to Sougetsu-sama...?"

"Sorry, but I didn't think of you or the Chairman as my parents a single ti——"

"You can't make that person angry...watching over troublesome children is...m-mother's role right...? If I leave you be...the one who will be scolded by Sougetsu-sama...w-w-will b-be me you knowww?!"

"....."

"...bad girl...! I need to punish you firmly as your mother...!"

She didn't listen to what they were talking about at all, she roused herself thinking of something strange.

"I-in the first place... I've thought it's strange for a long time now... why has Sougetsu-sama a-a-adopt you as his own child... see, I t-think! T-t-that person m-might be a l-l-loliconn!"

"....."

"S-surely he has a plan similar to the Tales of Genji... that's right! That's definitely it! Great that I realized it! After all, you're ripe for eating now, and I'll be past expiration date and cast away soon! I won't let you, I definitely won't let you Ouka-san, you intend to take Sougetsu-sama away don't youuu?! You thieving cat!"

As she shook her head hard, something like voltage ran through Kagerou.

She progressed with talking on her own. Her delusions were pure madness. Ouka made a painful expression and Mari, taken aback, hid behind Ouka.

"Yes, after all, Sougetsu-sama is minee. I w-w-won't give him to anyone! The only one dear to and loved by that person is meeEEeeEEeeeEee!"

While doing something similar to heavy metal's head-banging, Kagerou directed the gun's trumpet-like muzzle at Ouka.

Ouka pulled out her favorite guns from the thigh holsters. Unfortunately, Vlad couldn't be used. Anxious about the safety of the other members, she had to avoid fighting seriously here.

With escape as her goal she looked for a chance to do it——

"No way, I'm the weakest of weak against that type of people! I won't stand it physiologically, I'll knock her down with magic all at once!"

——Or so she thought of doing, but Mari acted super fast, expanding a magical circle to cast her magic.

Ouka stopped her in a hurry.

"Wait, Nikaido! That Relic Eater is——!"

"《Aurora Cannon》!"

Extending her both hands forward, Mari took a stance, accumulated and fired the magical power in an instant.

That's when.

The Relic Eater Kagerou poised roared.

"Sing! ——Antoinetteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

What was emitted from the muzzle along with the scream, was a 'sound'.

It was a tone that seemed like the wailing of the dead echoing from the bottom of hell.

The sound has come out from the muzzle which spread like a brass instrument and attacked the two. Although it wasn't visible, the impact of the sound was lethal.

The moment they have been exposed to the sound waves, an anomaly has occurred in Mari alone.

Momentarily her face was distorted with pain, the magic she accumulated in her hands and the magical circle below her feet has distorted as if melting.

Immediately after, the hoarded magical power——exploded right in front of her.

"KYAaAAaaaaaa!

"Khhh!"

Mari and Ouka were blown away. Normally, lethality of magic that wasn't built up fully was extremely low, but in case of Mari magical power's quality and quantity, that wasn't the case.

Ouka received less damage because she jumped away just before the explosion, but it wasn't so for Mari.

Both of her arms suffered severe burns in consequence of her magic's failure.

"...wh-at....is... this..."

Unable to stand, she curled up on top of the snow.

Ouka rushed over to her in a hurry and covered both of Mari's hands with snow. A sound as if water was being splashed on hot plate has sizzled and Mari raised a cry of anguish.

"That Relic Eater's magical property is "Disturbing Sound"...! Released right before enemy's magic is used, it causes outbursts of magic. While it's sounding, we can't use magic."

"Ngh, tell me that... earlier...!"

"It's your fault for trying to hit her before I could say anything!!"

Thanks to Ouka stopping her, Mari was able to diffuse magical power right on the brink of explosion, and yet this much damage was dealt. If she were to try releasing magic at full power, at worst, she might have died.

Give realisation of the potency of her own magical power, Mari glared at Kagerou.

Kagerou abruptly stretched her head towards them, tilted her head diagonally and fired the Relic Eater『Antoinette』.

Every time a tone was emitted, Mari gasped in pain.

The area was filled with waves of anti-magical sounds which could be heard only by witches, inhibited witches ability to build operative procedure and dealt them a tremendous pain through the phantom instrument. Kagerou's Antoinette freely manipulated the sounds in the area.

"I'm Sougetsu-sama's wife! That person's love, hatred, murderous intent, it's all to be aimed at me alone! I-I n-need to kill! If I rip you apart limb from limb, surely Sougetsu-sama will look at me aloneeeee! It will definitely be soOOoOOOO!"

While scratching her neck loudly, Kagerou moved closer to them while aiming Antoinette's muzzle at them. They had no choice but to prepare themselves for the worst.

Unable to rely on Mari's magic, Ouka was the only one who could do it.

She moved in front of Mari as if to protect her and pulled the triggers of her handguns.

Cold air wrapped around her body, Ikaruga felt her body slowly die. That gentle death was incredibly sweet, like a pleasant slumber.

She could no longer think, just focused on sleeping.

In middle of her slumber, a thought of a girl wearing a red lab coat passed through her head. In her childhood, a discussion on science in the middle of the night between the two of them, the whispers passed through her head.

Back when she knew nothing. Back when they didn't know whether they were happy or not.

In the flat every day life, she was the only existence that could speak with Ikaruga as equals.

She realized that person could be called her best friend... after she left to the outside world.

"...Isu...ka..."

Ikaruga sank in the middle of the cruel memories. Regret that she didn't stay beside her, and the comfort of those times took away Ikaruga's will to resist death.

There was someone who grasped her hand in middle of that.

A small outstretched hand dragged Ikaruga out from under the snow.

With the surroundings suddenly turning bright, Ikaruga raised her heavy eyelids.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a face of a girl looking down on her.

Blue hair and small pointed ears. Grumpy expression.

"Kanaria?"

As she called out her name with a weak voice, Kanaria looked away from Ikaruga.

Ikaruga tried to raised her upper body, but immediately lied back down feeling pain run through her ribs.

"How brittle. Made unable to move with just this, weak."

"...why did you...?"

As Ikaruga asked, Kanaria made a sullen expression.

"...I didn't really choose to save you. I just pulled on a hand sticking out of the snow. It turned out to be you. I drew the short stick. I wouldn't have helped you if I knew."

Acting coldly, Kanaria wouldn't look her into eyes.

Seeing her like that, Ikaruga made a thin smile.

Although she said that only a hand was visible, Ikaruga's hand was completely buried in the snow. Surely, when Ikaruga muttered Isuka's name, she heard the voice and hurriedly dug her out from the snow.

"...Thanks. You saved me."

"Shut upp. I told you I didn't intend to save you."

"Even so, thank you."

As straight as she could, Ikaruga relayed her feelings to Kanaria.

Possibly weak against words of gratitude like this, Kanaria's face turned bright red.

She hurriedly stood up and turned around on her heel.

"〜〜〜〜! Fine already!"

Smiling bitterly as Kanaria forcefully trudged through the snow, Ikaruga forced her aching body and somehow managed to stand up.

And, when she was about to chase after Kanaria's small back,

"Oww..."

Suddenly, Kanaria bumped into something and stopped in her tracks. Rubbing her forehead with a hand, Kanaria looked up overhead.

In front of her there was a giant, looking like a mountain.

"——!"

At the same time as Kanaria was horrified, the giant swung its right fist. Intending to fight back with a sword, she put her fingers on Lævateinn, that moment.

Someone grabbed Kanaria's collar.

Pulled rearwards, she fell on her back. With their positions swapped around, Kanaria saw Ikaruga move in front.

The giant's fist was swung down, and the moment it hit Kanaria witnessed Ikaruga's body fold into a 〈 shape.

Ikaruga was blown away and bounced on top of the snow then stopped moving, like a broken doll.

"———"

With eyes wide open, she stared at unmoving Ikaruga.

Meanwhile, the giant tried to swing his fist once again.

Kanaria triggered Soumatou, forcefully grasped Lævateinn's handle and pulled the sword out all at once.

She slashed the giant with a sword draw, blowing him away.

Without bothering to check whether she defeated him or not, stumbling, Kanaria ran towards where Ikaruga was.

She got on her knees beside fallen Ikaruga and after a moment of hesitation she rubbed Ikaruga's body.

"...hey.....?"

When she arrived to her side, Ikaruga barely managed to open her eyes to look at Kanaria.

"...are you... okay...?"

"....."

"Were you...hurt...?"

Ikaruga stretched out her trembling hand, trying to touch Kanaria's cheek.

She smiled thinly with a pale complexion, as if she was genuinely relieved...

"That's...great... you're okay..."

However, she exhausted her strength right before she could touch Kanaria's skin, Ikaruga's hand fell on the snow powerlessly.

The white breath disturbing the falling snow has stopped and Ikaruga didn't even twitch.

".....hey....."

Kanaria froze, like a stone statue she wouldn't move at all.

Once again, she heard the giant's thundering footsteps.

The gray giant she previously blown away has come back intact.

He stood behind Kanaria and once again swung his fist.

Kanaria didn't move. In the pool of blood, she continued to stare at Ikaruga's figure.

The fist has cut through the wind right beside her head.

——Kanaria's fingers which were about to touch Ikaruga accelerated with Soumatou and grabbed Lævateinn's handle in an instant.

She pulled it out and turned around at the same time, delivering a single slash to the giant.

The fist and the sword collided and a shockwave blew the powder snow in the air.

Moreover, flames swept down from Lævateinn, instantly dissolving and extinguishing the snow around them.

And then——

"...urraaaAAaaAAaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Was she... afraid of something? Connected with Lapis' soul, Takeru could faintly feel something like fear from her.

Let's ask for the reason this time.

Thinking so, he attempted to stand up, that's when he heard a voice come from the snow behind him.

"...Kusanagi-kuun? ...I can't see anything〜...it's you right, Kusanagi-kun〜?"

"President is it you?!"

"Yup〜, sorry but I can't breathe so could you dig me out〜... if you save me I'll give you a kiss or two〜 ehe〜."

Seeing Nagaru acted like she usually did even in a situation like this, Takeru dug her out in a hurry.

She was buried deep, but as she appeared from under the snow she sucked in breath loudly and smiled.

"Snow is so heavy〜, it was painful but I might get hooked on to the feeling of being pressed on〜."

"...please don't make such troublesome confessions. I'll pull you out now."

"Ahh, wait wait! Actually, my legs are sandwiched between fallen trees〜. If you pull now, my legs will be torn off."

Torn off? From what she said, the situation was dire enough for him to suspect his hearing.

Takeru gave up on pulling her out and dug in the snow until he uncovered Nagaru's feet.

A huge fallen tree was pressing on Nagaru's legs. Her thin legs were completely crushed and turned purple.

"...! I'll save you right away!"

"Ah〜there's no need to rush, It's perfectly fine〜. It's so cold it doesn't hurt〜."

He tried to create space between the fallen tree and her legs but it didn't go well. The snow was too brittle and the fallen tree sank in as he dug.

"You don't have to make that face〜. Nmm〜 you're so kind〜 aren't you〜♪."

Nagaru laughed, but this situation was no good at all. After the snow's pressure disappeared, blood started to flow out. The artery wasn't cut, but there was a serious injury.

"You must be worried about Ouka-chan and the others right... it seems like it'll take time, it's fine to ignore me and look for everybody. In case this is it for me, if you reach the home base's

destination, you'll understand how to access it, all the people in the dissident faction will lend you their strength."

She said so while squinting, but Takeru clenched his teeth and continued to work.

"Don't screw with me... you're our only hope...! You promised to help us...! I won't let you die in a place like this...!"

"....."

"The one whom I entrusted my hopes with isn't the dissidents——it's you!"

Nagaru stopped laughing and stared at Takeru's face intently.

"The one who told me to be spoiled was you, President!"

Feeling half-desperate he blurted out something embarrassing, but Nagaru smiled happily.

That expression made it seem as if she found purpose in life, she laughed lovely towards Takeru.

"...I can't win against such a spoiled child〜."

He smiled back seeing her usual slovenly expression.

Thanks to the snow being squeezed and turning hard, he was able to make space between the fallen tree and her feet.

With that, he could recover her from under the snow. Takeru grasped Nagaru's hand in a hurry and tried to pull her out.

"——Yes, that's as far as you go."

Takeru gasped hearing a sound of someone putting a finger on a gun's trigger.

After he slowly stood up and turned around, he saw Magnolia stand there aiming the muzzle at him.

"Perfect timing even if I say so myself eh. That was a real good farce there. Unconsciously I felt like waitin' there until ya end. There' no way I'll be waitin' though."

After letting out a bored yawn, Magnolia spat out a sigh seeing Takeru stand in front of Nagaru to protect her.

"Umm, could ya move away? They'll be angry if I kill ya. It's all fine as long as ya come back to school with us... I'll put down that racoon behind ya."

"I refuse."

"Immediate answer eh. For real, could ya reconsider? I mean, it's damn cold. I'm tired of the game of tag. I wanna go back asap."

"If you want to go back, do it on your own... I won't let you bunch kill her and I don't have any intention of coming with you either."

When he flatly refused, feelings of frustration and annoyance appeared on Magnolia's face and she scratched her head with one hand.

Takeru put a hand on Lapis shoulder who was beside him, a step behind.

"...Lapis... lend me your strength now...!"

"....."

"If we're beaten here, everything will be ruined...! Please, partner...!"

"....."

"I don't know what are you scared about, but I'll be all right...!"

Hearing Takeru plead to her, Lapis faced downwards.

".....I understand."

After seeing Lapis make a small nod, Takeru glared at Magnolia.

Magnolia stared coldly at Takeru.

"Ahh damn, what a pain. Looks like there ain't no choice but to tear off his limbs first."

Takeru triggered Soumatou and pulled out a spare knife from his waist.

At the same time, Magnolia released a magical bullet.

"Summis desiderantes affectibus——!"

Swinging the anti-magical knife along with the chant, Takeru blocked the bullet.

After one, two bullets, the blade broke.

As the pieces scattered, Magnolia shot the third bullet.

A scarlet-colored magical bullet approached from the front.

"——Malleus Maleficarum!"

Just before he was hit, Takeru's body was encased in particles.

A high-pitched metallic sound rang out.

The magical bullet was hit by azure-colored blade and blown away to the side.

Swinging the Mistilteinn he held in his hand sideways, clad in azure-colored knightly armor Takeru confronted Magnolia.

"So you wanna go at it after all huh. And here my body is already cold after bein' hit by that avalanche."

The two in witch hunter forms glared at each other.

Takeru pointed his sword at Magnolia, a flame dwelled in his pupils.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style initiate, Kusanagi Takeru——if you don't intend to pull away, I'll cut you up with all I have!"

Magnolia shrugged and aimed the dual-wielded guns tiredly.

However, her eyes alone were shining like that of a hungry wolf.

"Inquisition's Zeroth Extermination Riot Police's vice captain, Magnolia Scarlet. It can't be helped so this once, as your senior, I'll take you on."

"——Cut the crap!"

Takeru thrust into Magnolia's bosom for the first move victory.

It was a bad idea to prolong the fight if one had guns as their opponent.

He closed the distance all at once and slashed using all his bodily strength!

When Takeru nearly reached Magnolia, he swung the sword in order to cut off her arm.

"I see——I see!!"

However, Magnolia lightly twisted her body and avoided the blow Takeru put everything in.

"Wha...!"

After the slash was avoided, the sword continued to travel in the same direction with a surplus momentum.

He definitely triggered Soumatou. A normal human being, even reinforced with witch hunter form wouldn't have been able to catch up to his movement.

Riding on the momentum of avoidance, Magnolia fired from the gun in her right hand.

A total of five rounds. Scarlet-colored magical bullets closed onto Takeru.

These bullets ain't that fast! This much is nothing!

He cut all of it.

Reading the trajectory, if his sword rides the flow it'll easily——

——Contrary to Takeru's prediction, the magical bullets stopped right in front of him.

"?!"

Once again, Takeru's sword cut the air.

In the slow-motion world, he saw the corners of Magnolia's mouth distort.

"——Bam♪."

Momentarily, the magical bullets suspended in the air assaulted Takeru's body all at once.

Five impacts blew Takeru away.

The bullets haven't disappeared even after hitting and caused Takeru's body to dance in the air like a pinball.

The magical bullets were like fairies playing with a human, overrunning Takeru.

He was being overrun until the magical power of the bullets was exhausted.

By the time he fell on top of the snow, Takeru's body in witch hunter form was all beat up.

"You're quite brittle despite all that big talk ain't you. But I get it now, I've heard about it but this is the brain processing speed acceleration eh. I see I see, certainly, that's cheating."

"...damn...why...!"

Using the sword as a walking stick Takeru stood up.

Another one after Haunted and Elizabeth. Humans who can catch up with Soumatou's movements... thinking of possibilities, there would be accelerating processing speed by magic or someone who has mastered technique to counter variants like the Double-Edged style.

"Ahh, let me say this, I'm not a superman like you and I'm not using magic okay?"

"There's no...way...!"

"It's true. It's all thanks to my intuition and experience... is what I want to say, but that's not it either. Those movements aren't something that can be dealt with so easily. Unfortunately, this strength is something I borrowed."

Magnolia raised her hands with a shrug.

Borrowed. Magnolia definitely said that.

He thought its one of the benefits from Magical Heritage but... suddenly, Magnolia put a hand on her chest.

"See, Alchemist said they want a test subject〜, it was interesting so I went as a candidate. They want to make it practical, I wonder if that makes me a prototype..."

She forcefully peeled off the armor on her chest.

Unable to understand that action, Takeru felt a discomfort.

"Been a while since you last met right? She wanted to meet you so she'll definitely be happy〜."

"...what are you talking about."

"It was quite hard ya know? The moment I give her a chance she erodes my body and the moment she catches your smell she either cries or gets horny. I wonder what kind of expression will she make once she sees your face? Let's try it."

Magnolia moved her hand away from her chest and showed off her skin to Takeru.

Judging by the color there was an old wound in there making him want to look away, but seeing what was in the center, Takeru felt a buzz inside of his chest.

The crucial was the single word Magnolia said.

"——Look, it's your beloved *Onii-chan*〜."

He felt a chill in his spine.

In the center of Magnolia's chest, there, was something akin to a dark red tumor.

It was familiar to him. Takeru saw it twice in the past.

First time was on the day he lost his father and mother.

The second time was recently, a month and a half ago.

There was no way he could forget it. That cursed yet dear existence.

When Magnolia said "Onii-chan", the eyelids lodged inside of the tumor gradually opened.

Behind them, there was a horribly clear, red eye.

Takeru shivered, feeling sadness, fear and despair.

The opened red eye stared at Takeru's figure——and laughed gently.

『"Onii-chan."』

——He felt Kiseki's voice echo in his head, even though it shouldn't be possible.

The eye variant once again closed its eyelid sleepily.

"Chairman was looking for a way to control yer lil' sis, it was finally found after movin' her to Alchemist."

"....."

"When they attempted to put her to sleep in an Iron Maiden she would go berserk like usual, but with REM sleep state is maintained, lil' sis body was undergoing a variety of changes. Alchemist is inserting an artificial video in her dreams by using electrical signal and her body... in short, they were able to stabilize Hyakki Yakou."

"....."

"By using dreams, controlling her artificially has become possible. After reaching that point, the company folks wanted to try so many things〜. Like I said earlier, as an experimental subject I had the Hyakki Yakou's cell transplanted into a part of my body is what it means."

While watching Takeru's reactions, Magnolia spoke joyfully.

"Thanks to that my body's been strengthened to the level of witch hunter form〜. The brain's processing speed improved too, see? And with just some cells? Naw, really, the demon's body is amazin', it's super painful but moving this well is really fun!"

"....——"

"Oh, by the way, do you want to know what kind of a dream is Kiseki-chan havin' now? Seriously! This is some stuff that makes me embarrassed just by lookin'! The only characters innit is Onii-chan and the little sister! In a world there's no one else in they're goin' on dates, eatin' together, kissinn' and... uhihihi, even Onii-chan would be taken aback if he heard that one〜! Maybe it's better not to say it〜! No, let's say it! In that girl's dream she and Onii-chan are——"

"YOU BITTCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Takeru burst into anger, his eyes were dyed bright red as he rushed at Magnolia.

His speed was at Soumatou's limit.

The attack reaching speed of sound has assaulted Magnolia.

"Uhyahyahyahya! I said it won't work!"

Magnolia laughed loudly and parried Takeru's attack with the gun's barrel.

Once again, the Relic Eater released magical bullets.

The bullets orbited Takeru faster than his maximum speed was and assaulted him.

"My Bloody Mary's magical bullets are manipulated with my will! Admittedly, it ain't too convenient to use, but thanks to the demon cells I can manipulate them at high speed!"

Takeru's body was exposed to the magical bullets.

It was as if he was being hit by a machine gun. The impact came from all directions and the armor on his body was being apart away.

Furthermore, the moment the magical bullets exhausted their magical power, Magnolia closed the distance between them and thrust the gun's muzzle under his chin.

"——Good night♪."

She squeezed the trigger, hit directly by a magical bullet under his chin, Takeru's head twitched upwards.

Although the power wasn't all that big since it was suppressed, it was strong enough to completely crush his jaw.

Like a boxer hit by an uppercut, Takeru bent backwards. But thinking he would fall over if that continued——he sunk his head downwards and rebuilt his posture, and his neck was grasped by Magnolia.

"Ghh! He... seriously... despite being damn brittle you're unexpectedly tough...!"

"Tear off that immediately! That's part of Kiseki! Give her back! That's not something you...!"

"Uhahahahaha! What's this guy sayin' now! This is a part of the curse affecting your lil' sis' ain't it? Since I took over part of that, rather than hating me you should be grateful eh?"

"......!!"

"——As if, fooooooooool! If left alone it would continue to grow endlessly, there's no way takin' two of those would make it easier on that brat! Uhyahyahyahyahya!"

In response to Magnolia's provocation, Takeru's anger burst forth again.

Pulling back his arm, he attempted to thrust with his sword.

However, Magnolia's power, speed and defense was higher, she released the constraint and fled kicking him in the belly.

Blown through the snow, Takeru was about to hit a large tree painted white.

On the bring of the clash, he triggered a technique.

"——Ghost Light Firefly!"

Placing his legs on the tree, he jumped off from it using the recoil's momentum.

Pulverizing the large tree, Takeru's body flew over to Magnolia in straight line.

Five magical bullets were fired from the gun's muzzle.

Although the scarlet bullets surrounded Takeru, he read their flow and cut them all down while rotating.

"You can get even faster?! T-this ain't good."

Magnolia displayed impatience.

Riding on the flow, Takeru approached Magnolia without killing the momentum.

At the same time he moved his right foot forward and sheathed his sword.

He clenched the sheath and handle in an instant, and a repulsive force was generated on the fingers holding the collar.

"Double-Edged style——Heavenly Evil Spirit!!"

A super-speed drawing technique was released.

It was impossible to avoid. No matter if the opponent had demon's cells embedded, even if they could catch up with Soumatou's speed, this attack was fastest among techniques Takeru had and unavoidable.

The sword approached the neck of stunned Magnolia.

Her expression distorted, faced with impending death.

"——Just jookin'."

The moment the blade was about to behead her, Magnolia showed him her tongue sloppily.

It was too late to be on guard.

He was hit by a sensation as if a switch was pressed in the space itself.

The blade didn't stop. Moving straight, it cut Magnolia's throat.

Still maintaining posture he used when he swung the sword, Takeru opened his eyes widely.

Something happened. But, he didn't know what.

His wide-opened eyes stared at Magnolia.

And there was——

"Unfortunately."

——Magnolia whose head should have been cut off was intact, and showed him her tongue.

Takeru did a cross-cut with the sword, slashing Magnolia through the brain from above.

Without a doubt, this time the blade cut Magnolia in half.

He raised his head with confidence.

——She was intact.

Magnolia laughed as if looking down on him.

Faced with impossible situation, Takeru's lips trembled.

"——ngh, oooOOOOOOOoOOO!"

Using Ghost Light Firefly he released continuous attacks, chopping Magnolia up.

But no matter how much he cut her, he dealt no damage to her.

Even though there was a resistance, there was a feeling of something being cut.

And yet——she wouldn't go down.

"It's pointless no matter how much you cut me. Mary's intrinsic magic 《Turn Over》. This magic reverses any destruction and recovery the user undergoes. No matter how much ya cut me up, the wounds just heal and ya deal no damage."

"...what...?!"

"This too, is really inconvenient to use. But it has an overwhelming effect on people who can't use recovery magic and can only cut people up〜."

While continuously receiving Takeru's attacks, Magnolia set up the guns in both her hands.

The destruction and recovery are reversed. All the attacks turn into recovery, all recovery turns into destruction.

If that was true, Takeru had no way around it.

"It's seriously tiring to suppress the power. Sorry 'bout this——but I'll crush your limbs for real."

Magical bullets were emitted from Bloody Mary.

Rather than a scarlet sphere, what was emitted were small, snake-like dragons.

The bullet bit on Takeru's limbs and the teeth made of magical power gnawed on him.

"GAAAaAAHhhhhhhhh!"

Takeru made a painful cry.

《"...Host...!"》

Lapis who has been silent up until now called out to Takeru with a bitter voice.

Although he'd like to tell her not to worry, he couldn't. There were only bones left on his legs and his hands were torn off completely.

"It's pointless to try recoverin'. If I put a serious amount of magic... those magical dragon bullets will persist for two minutes."

"...damn....it...!"

"Come on already, don't make me waste time〜. Just stay here quietly〜. I'll go and clean up your leader there."

Passing by Takeru whose limbs were beyond recovery, Magnolia walked up to Nagaru who couldn't move stuck under a fallen tree.

Nagaru turned her exhausted face towards Magnolia.

And laughed.

Magnolia directed the gun's muzzle at Nagaru, coldly looking down on her.

"...I wonder why are ya laughing on the death's doorstep. Is there something wrong with yer head?"

"...ha, haha..."

"Oh, that reminds me, you had a defect since birth? Not having negative feelings or something."

How enviable, Magnolia muttered ironically.

Nagaru still laughed. She looked at Magnolia and laughed.

"There's that too〜... but the reason I'm laughing now is something else."

"Ha?"

"Naww, haha... this is a bit surprising〜. I didn't think that you would be a girl〜."

A girl. The moment she said so, Magnolia's eyes shook.

Nagaru continued not bothered.

"Why is she dressing like a man〜, how mysterious〜... looking at the scars on your breasts, one would think something happened to you in the past〜 I thought..."

".....hey."

"If you want to... how about you tell me about it? Possibly, I might be able to save you... why do you hate the world so much... could you tell me?"

Hearing unexpected words, Magnolia turned expressionless.

Saving Magnolia, an enemy. To Nagaru who loved saving people, Magnolia must have looked delicious.

Magnolia pressed a muzzle against Nagaru's forehead and raised her by grasping her collar.

Nagaru's crushed legs let out a sound of being torn off.

"U-ghuuuu...!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, you damn raccoon! I don't need sympathy of a defective garbage like you!"

Baring her emotions, Magnolia put her finger on the trigger.

With a troubled smile, Nagaru endured the pain and released strength from her body.

"I see〜, a shame... recently, I've had quite good luck〜... I guess it's the end of it."

"Really a shame! 'Cause I'm gonna blow away this rotten brain of yours!"

Nagaru squinted and let out a sigh.

"Really... it's a shame... but it would be good if it was the last time.

——It would be good if this was the last time I hurt a person directly."

She spoke puzzling words.

As if to say she feels unpleasant, Magnolia put strength into the finger on the trigger.

——It was then, a sound of something piercing through the meat on her abdomen could be heard.

"...ah...?"

She stopped squeezing the trigger and looked at her abdomen.

In there, piercing through her was an old-fashioned dagger. The handle was held by Nagaru.

She was stabbed. In that instant.

Magnolia laughed it off as something pointless.

"...hahahahaha! You don't know when to give up, racoon! Don't you understand?! Right now the damage and recovery is reversed for m——"

"I know that. That's why I stabbed you——with that Magical Heritage."

Momentarily, a pale aqua light overflowed from Magnolia's abdomen.

The dagger shone.

Magnolia released her hands from Nagaru and touched the dagger stabbed in her.

Soon enough, a pain from a burn ran through her fingertips.

"......——This is...!"

"Yup. The Magical Heritage that was at the inn's hot spring source. Its effect is recovery of the pierced target. I thought it might get handy and negotiated with the properties to borrow it."

Losing the support Nagaru fell on top of the snow and said so while smiling weakly.

Magnolia took a step back staggering.

A fierce pain ran through her belly and light wrapped around her body.

Her appearance made it seem as if she was being burned in flames of a pale aqua colour.

Before her entire body was wrapped in flames, speechless, Magnolia looked at Nagaru's face.

Nagaru smiled regretfully and said.

"Sorry. It's an A-class Magical Heritage so it's effectiveness is tremendous."

Immediately after that apology, Magnolia's body was burned in flames of recovery. Magnolia pulled out the blade from her abdomen in a hurry.

Even with the dagger pulled out, the recovery effect has seeped into her blood and continued to persist.

At the moment, Magnolia suffered hell.

As Magnolia writhed and screamed, Nagaru once again silently apologized to her.

The magical dragon bullets eating his limbs disappeared and Takeru crawled up to Nagaru.

She smiled brightly to him.

"We match now〜. Kusanagi-kun's arms, my legs〜."

"...don't laugh at times like this too. My limbs will be recovered by Lapis, but... President's legs can't be laughed off so easily."

"Nn〜it's real cold in the snow, they'll surely stick back〜."

Takeru was unable to respond to this broken positiveness.

She looked incredibly strong as she laughed despite being so beat-up. Even if it was because of a defect, he thought she was a strong person.

"If not for President... I lost. Thank you very much. I said that I'll protect you, but I was protected instead... I have nothing to say."

"Nn〜fufu〜. You were protected, mm? Spoiled boy〜."

Being told that with a sweet voice, Takeru blushed.

And then, Nagaru pursed her lips with "Nmm〜" and turned towards him.

There was a good mood earlier, but it was all ruined now.

".....um, what's with that."

"Isn't this the part where hero and heroine who have overcome a hardship kiss?"

"It's not a last scene of an action movie... I'm not doing it!"

"Smoo〜och."

"I said I won't do it!"

After exchanging a comedic dialogue in the afterglow of the victory, Nagaru and Takeru sighed.

It wasn't over yet. They needed to confirm everyone's safety.

He needs Lapis to recover his limbs and perform a search.

The moment Takeru thought so.

Suddenly, Magnolia's body that was supposed to be unable to move jumped on top of the snow.

"Gi-ghh... aghaaa!!"

A piercing scream caused Takeru and Nagaru to tense up.

Magnolia writhed on top of the snow while scratching her chest.

"...don't move! It's very severe, you'll die if you move! There's no point in fighting any longer, stay there quiet——"

"——Wru-wron'... his, this...! This, the moment I got hit... the eye woke up...!"

She cried with a desperate tone of voice.

The eye, woke up?

What on earth, he was unable to ask.

After all, the change has already begun.

A mass of dark red meat has crawled out from Magnolia's chest.

Like blood vessels it crawled through her body, and extending into the snow it dyed it red.

"Shit, not good... I can't suppress it no longer——g-gyaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Along with the scream, waves of meat overflowed.

It was exactly the same stuff that swallowed entire section of a city before.

Distorted meat chunks clotted with eyes and mouths.

The wide-opened eyeballs stared at Takeru simultaneously.

And,

『"Onii-chan."』『"Onii-chan."』『"Onii-chan."』『"Onii-chan."』『"Onii-chan."』『"Onii-chan."』
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Just like back then——she sought her older brother.

The Glossary

Turn Over（ターンオーバー）- It's written as（鏡越しの惨劇）meaning "Tragedy Over the Mirror".

Chapter 6 - Path to Follow

Mari, who injured both of her hands didn't move.

She could only look at the battle between Ouka and Kagerou.

Even if she used just her own flesh, Ouka assessed Kagerou's movements and tried to avoid.

Kagerou's movements were very sluggish, but Ouka's attacks didn't connect at all.

"Ufufuufufufu! You shouldn't raise your hand against your momm! Mischievous children have to be punished righttttt!"

Ouka sporadically fired at her from a distance, but the bullets were deflected and their trajectory changed as they hit the wall of sound.

In a wobbly gait, Kagerou approached Ouka who was unable to match her and released a sound blast from Antoinette. The impact hit Ouka. There was no physical damage, but the sound has caused a tremendous strain on her soul.

"Antoinette was originally a Relic Eater specializing in logistical support and wasn't useful in combat... you see, sound can damage the brain and bodies, it has various effects on people's minds... it's a wonderful thing... hey, are you scared? It's scary right? This tonee!"

"Haa...uu!"

The wave of sound which seemed like it came from the bottom of hell gave Ouka goose bumps.

It was the aberrant "Sound of Fear".

Ouka's soul shivered, trembled in fear.

The sound's impact affected her soul directly causing it to tremble.

The intrinsic magic of Magical Heritages was more like a supernatural ability than magic, despite using magical power. Since a part of operative procedures and laws were disorganized, there was no way around it but twist them forcefully.

As she felt fear defying logic, Ouka's legs naturally shook.

However——

"So... whaaaaatttttt!"

Ouka removed the load on her soul with her fighting spirit.

No, to be precise, she only pretended not to notice it.

The terrible experiences she has suffered through until now kept her alive now. Honestly speaking, something like fear wouldn't hinder her movements. She had gruesome memories of the past, and as an Inquisitor, she experienced various bizarre incidents. Numerous heinous crimes.

Mephisto, and Laugh Maker's mental domination.

She was *used to it.*

Ouka stopped shooting at Kagerou and closed the distance between them all at once.

Kagerou took a step back surprised.

Instead of shooting, Ouka brought the fight to close combat.

Her specialty, a high roundhouse kick angrily flew at the opponent like a sickle.

Although it was blocked by a wall of the sound on the verge of hitting the side of Kagerou's head, Ouka decided to ride on the momentum of the roundhouse kick and moved behind her.

The sound cutting through the wind sounded dreadfully in the snow.

"...hiii...!"

Kagerou faltered despite not even being hit.

Of course, even if she were to suffer a direct hit, there would hardly be any damage as she was in witch hunter form. Since she was using a Relic Eater, there should be nothing to be afraid of.

However, desperate opponents are truly ghastly. Even more so for Kagerou who has never fought in close combat, continuous attacks from Ouka who looked like a demon must have been terrifying.

"Thinking the enemy will go down just because they're scared is shallow! Ootori Kagerou!"

"...ss-s-s-such a thing, i-it's not a sound that can be dealt with just fighting spirit...!"

"Even if you grant me fear——I just have to burn through with the will to fight!!"

There were many reactions humans showed in response to extraordinary fear.

They freeze on spot, wail or try to escape.

However, among them there are those whose fighting spirit is roused instead.

Although it's said that people go berserk because of anger, but fear causes the adrenaline to be secreted excessively, if one stands up against the enemy maintaining their composure it completes the best mental condition.

Ouka was indeed that type.

She changed fear into courage. Although it sounds easy, there weren't many who could pull it off.

The experience from numerous carnages, a rare insight.

And a certain kind of a talent was necessary.

"Haa!!"

Ouka's furious attack has begun.

A barrage of kicks was delivered at a speed hard to follow, cornering Kagerou.

The thing called sound waves aren't something suitable for defending against natural physical attacks. Even if they were able to deviate the trajectory of bullets, they couldn't nullify the impact.

Although, obviously, Ouka's attacks didn't go through just because of that.

However, her attacks scared Kagerou, dulling her actions.

Although the defensive waves of Antoinette had a long duration, they weren't automatic and the trigger had to be pulled.

Knowing there will definitely be an opportunity then, Ouka noticed several constraints Kagerou had.

She continued to distract her with continuous kicks, and the moment Kagerou's finger was about to pull the trigger——Ouka hit her face with the gun she held in her hand.

——**shhp**, the muzzle sank into Kagerou's cheek.

"You should have trained your body and spirit!"

A bullet was fired from the muzzle pressing on the cheek at point blank.

Adamantium bullets. Even with witch hunter form on, at point blank she wouldn't get out of that unscathed.

At the same time as the bullet was fired, Kagerou's head was blown to the side.

Ouka's favorite handgun emphasized on compact size and ease of handling. Its power was low. However, since it was subjected to Ikaruga's demonic remodeling, it was unbelievable, but it boasted of power comparable to that of a 0.50 caliber's.

By delivering a single attack, Ouka found a slight chance for victory.

Blown away Kagerou held her cheek as she rolled on top of the snow.

"Hi-highhuuu!"

Turning pathetic, Kagerou raised a bitter cry.

Ouka chased after her, trying to approach in a hurry, but movement of the cornered Kagerou's was eerily fast.

shrshrshrshrshrshrshrshrshrshrshr, crawling on the ground on all fours like an insect, she took distance from Ouka and stuck closely to a big tree's trunk.

Because that movement was too disgusting, Ouka couldn't move for a moment. Frankly speaking, these movements made her flinch more than 『Sound of Fear』 did.

Still sticking to the big tree, Kagerou turned her head by ninety degrees towards Ouka.

"H-h-how dare you hurt a maiden's face! E-even if you're my daughter I w-won't show you mercy any moreeee?!"

"...it doesn't seem like you were showing any before though..."

Taken aback, Ouka narrowed her eyes.

For some reason, facing Kagerou who wasn't accustomed to fighting she didn't feel the tension.

"L-let me tell you this s-straight, okay? I-it's not my hobby but... i-if I'm too slow I won't be able to make Sougetsu-sama's dinner... r-right, right?"

Ouka tried to take Kagerou down before she could display a new move.

From Antoinette's trumpet roared a sound of a different nature.

——BUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNN...!!"

A loud, violent sound. The bullets Ouka shoot were deflected and her body was blown away along with the snow.

"——nh——aa——!"

Because of the loud sound, Mari lost her hearing.

Blown away Ouka too, was bleeding from her eyes, nose and ears.

Hit by the impact of the sound her eardrums were torn and parts of her body seemed about to burst. She barely managed to withstand it thanks to the snow, that's because snow was naturally sound-absorbent. However, the strength of it was too high for snow alone to absorb it all.

"...I-I can't hear anything!"

Mari couldn't hear her own voice.

Ouka was the same as Mari, although she managed to stand up somehow, her movement was clearly strange. On top of losing the hearing, her sense of balance seemed to be gone.

It seemed like Kagerou was laughing since her shoulders were moving up and down.

"T-that's rightt. As for the ingredients for today's dinner, let's use Ouka-san! Your breasts are really big and look soft... they look tastyy! That meager girl over there doesn't have much meat, so I think I'll make a broth out of herrr! H-h-how about it! Aha-hihi, s-s-surely Sougetsu-sama will be d-delighted won't heee?!"

Although Mari didn't know what was she saying, judging from the way Kagerou moved her mouth she felt it was something very rude.

Not good... at this rate Ootori Ouka will...!

Ouka set up her guns and took aim with her trembling hands.

It didn't seem like she'll be able to withstand another sound attack like that.

She left Mari behind and fought against Kagerou alone.

Mari offered to help her fight, but was told she's useless if she can't use magic and could only follow Ouka's instructions. She regretted that now.

Damn it... a development where she dies to save me is no good at all!

She clenched her fist.

To Mari, Ouka was an enemy. But even though she calls her enemy, she's one as a rival in love.

At first she was authoritative and annoying, she just an enemy to Mari. They didn't match physiologically or maybe their souls rejected each other, it was something like that.

Their relationship had changed because of Takeru.

Since Mari was saved by Takeru, she spent her days thinking only of him. She couldn't remember the moment she fell for him. Anyway, since he saved her she started to feel of him passionately. His face, his voice, his breath and every move of his made her feel at peace, making her heart throb.

It wasn't logical. She honestly loved him so much it was unbearable.

For such love of Mari's, the number one obstacle was Ouka.

She knew that Usagi and Ikaruga love Takeru as well, but there was something different about that woman. Rather than her character, it was the atmosphere between Takeru and Ouka that was different. Somehow, Ouka had a strong feeling around her making her seem like an opponent Mari can't win against.

But even so, Mari didn't pull back. She was fine plundering away her love. If Ouka walks beside Takeru, she'll rouse her fighting spirit and get between the two of them.

She is my enemy. The moment Mari decided that, she had involved herself with Ouka, since then, she has gotten to understand Ouka well.

Before she realized, she stopped hating her. If anything, after getting to know her better she found many parts in Ouka she had favorable impressions of.

She's an enemy. A formidable enemy. I absolutely can't lose to this woman.

But even so——Mari's personality wasn't wretched enough as to acknowledge her enemy dying before they settle it. 'If Ouka dies Takeru will be mine', there was no way she could agree with such reasoning.

Nikaido Mari's pride wouldn't allow it.

I'll be the one to defeat that woman!

Mari stood up clenching her shredded fists.

And looking up at the sky covered in thunderclouds, she took a deep breath.

Sound is just an shockwave! If I'm being twisted by an shockwave, I just have to respond with a bigger shockwave! And that can be only done with magical power!

There's no need to assemble magic.

It's fine to just release it.

As much magical power as possible!

"OOORRYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Along with a roar which seemed like it would break her lungs, Mari discharged magical power from her body.

"W-W-W-Wwhaat whaat is t-thisss?!"

The gaze of Kagerou who was about to deliver the finishing blow to Ouka got stuck on Mari.

From inside of Mari, rainbow-colored particles have swept down with a fierce momentum.

The only magical power that has a destructive force by itself is just the Dragon ancient property. Even Aurora ancient property couldn't cause destruction unless magic was spun with it.

If she released it just like that, it would result with nothing more than a breeze.

That is *if she had been a normal witch.*

But Mari was different. The Witch of the Aurora definitely wasn't normal. The quality of her magical power, the amount, the ability to release it.

Each of them was special.

Mari released the magic from inside of her.

All of it. Without holding back she continued until she was empty.

The shockwave that release has produced has easily pushed back the sound waves.

"Giiyahhhhhhh!!"

Like a scarecrow blown off by strong wind, Kagerou was blown away.

"AAAaaaaaaaa〜〜〜〜〜〜.....afun."

After releasing everything, Mari fell flat forward.

Ouka was also splendidly blown away, but after landing on top of the snow she immediately ran over to where Kagerou was blown off.

Kagerou tried to pick up Antoinette that was blown away, but was stopped by Ouka who sat on top of her.

Because she let go of the gun, witch hunter form has dissolved.

"W-ww-waitt——"

"——Sorry, but I can't hear anythingg!"

Ouka pulled out a knife from her waist and stabbed through Kagerou's hands.

Even as she raised vulgar screams, Ouka couldn't hear them.

Next, Ouka rotated the gun in her palms and hit Kagerou's chin with the bottom of the magazine.

"Ahiii!"

crack, the sound of Kagerou's jaw breaking has resounded.

Already weak after being shot earlier, she fainted with a dislocated jaw.

Ouka released the pressure on Kagerou's shoulders, and was about to fall on top of her.

But, recalling Mari's existence she rushed over to her immediately.

"Nikaido! Are you okay?!"

After being slapped, Mari made a displeased expression.

"E-empty... nothing will come out."

"Mm?! What?! Can't hear anything, gesture it!"

"I-I definitely won't lose... to...you..."

——*fwump*

Although Ouka was deaf, for some reason she felt like she heard a classical sound.

After leaving those words Mari exhausted herself. It wasn't a metaphor, she really exhausted herself. If a witch's phantom instrument suddenly empties they can fall seriously ill.

"H-hey! Did you die?! Ahhhh she's not breathing! Heart... hey, it stopped beating!"

"....."

"Oh come on! Are you trying to make me do that a second time dammit——!!"

While shaking Mari whose heart stopped beating, Ouka cried.

In the end, Ouka once again performed mouth-to-mouth and a heart massage on Mari.

The two-handed sword's blade and the storm arm collided.

Kanaria scattered flames from Lævateinn and glared, looking like a demon.

"GHHHHHHHHHHHHHHUUUUUUuuu!"

"....."

Contrary to Kanaria who went berserk, Gou coldly stared at her.

For some reason, Lævateinn's flame of destruction didn't work on Gou. He slipped through Mari's barrier before, so Kanaria guessed that this man's Relic Eater's intrinsic performance must be being "Unaffected by Magic and Magic Power".

But for some reason she was happy about it now.

For Kanaria who fought with a sword, magic was just extra aid.

Cut with the sword. She didn't know any other way to fight than that.

The two's attacks turned into a contest of strength. There was no meaning in contending with power when strength was near equal, she would only exhaust herself this way, that's what Kanaria learned from Orochi.

She clenched her fist and hit him with fully activated Soumatou.

Kanaria was overwhelmingly faster. Even with the incomplete Lævateinn, with a blazing blade and her physical strength she should be able to fight equally against enemy in witch hunt form.

"True Light style——Hornet's Blade!"

She mercilessly slashed Gou with continuous attacks using her brute force. In circumstances where she couldn't use terrain or accumulate strength, for Kanaria who hasn't mastered Double-Edged style well enough, using anti-personnel True Light style was easier. Paired with Soumatou, it could be used even against a monstrous opponent.

The thrust had broken the armor and Gou's body was exposed.

There was absolutely no hesitation in Kanaria's blade.

Inside of her, there was only anger and murderous intent.

She didn't understand why was she so angry. There was hatred against Ikaruga in her, but there should be no affection. Ikaruga should be just a target of her hatred for abandoning Kanaria's mother, Isuka.

And yet, the moment she saw her bleed, everything in front of her turned red.

There was not a single reason for Ikaruga's appearance overlap with Isuka's image.

The reason behind this impulse was an emotion Kanaria couldn't comprehend.

"——Wolf's Blade!"

The moment there was a chance she attacked, she lowered her upper body to add weight into the upwards attack.

Gou tried to guard himself with his upper arm, but there was no way he could block Kanaria's attack.

The armor on his upper body was blown off and his huge body shook greatly.

His defense was broken. If she hits him with another attack, she will damage his flesh and blood directly.

Seeing a chance she swung her sword sideways.

She aimed at the part with shattered armor on the side of his head.

He definitely can't block it. She'll finish him now——

——**screeechh**

Unexpectedly, the sound that rang out roared wasn't that of a head breaking, but a metallic one.

Dumbfounded, Kanaria forgot about her anger.

It was blocked. In that situation, with that timing.

Moreover, Gou didn't block it with his arm.

He blocked it with mouth.

Gou who peeked out from inside the shattered helmet caught Lævateinn with his large mouth and fangs.

No matter how one looked at it, that appearance wasn't that of a human. Skin covered with fur, pointed ears, cat-like yellow pupils. Appearance of a variant that could be seen only in books.

"...a werewolf...?!"

Werewolf. One of the tribe that was destroyed by vampires in the past was in front of her.

"GRRrrRrrrrrrr...!"

While still gnawing on Lævateinn, Gou swung his fist at Kanaria's abdomen.

I screwed up! It was too late when she thought so.

Her body was bent into 〈 shape. Her breathing stopped and she spat out blood.

And it didn't end with that.

Gou's clenched fist had metal parts attached forming something like a cestus.

It was that part which sank in Kanaria's abdomen before exploding.

The impact she was hit with made her feel like her limbs will be blown off, Kanaria soared into the sky before falling and slamming into the snow.

"Ii....ugh...hhh....hh!"

Kanaria fell on her back, her abdomen was burnt by the explosion. Normally her body would have been blasted to bits, but thanks to a wood elf's sturdiness and Lævateinn's strengthening she didn't die.

But, that was all.

The bones in her body were in a horrible state. Her internal organs too, were almost crushed by the explosion's pressure.

Gou walked firmly through the snow, his heavy footsteps could be heard.

On the metal part of the fist there was a string of characters saying 《The Malleus Maleficarum VII “Ivan”》.

The Relic Eater "Ivan" was a grenade launcher's prototype, similarly to Ouka's Vlad it has a close combat-specialized form, a blasting cestus. As Kanaria guessed earlier, its intrinsic performance is that the user is "Unaffected by Magic and Magical Power". But on the other hand, the physical defense of the armor was low.

What compensated for the low defense was a high vitality of a werewolf.

A werewolf's fur was tougher than muscle.

Gou stood beside Kanaria, grabbed her hair and raised her up without saying a word.

The pain caused her expression to distort and she opened her eyes thinly.

Her eyes met the wolves' eyes as he pulled his fist backwards.

His pupils were different, but the shine she saw in them made her feel that he was very similar to her.

Eyes of someone who lost everything and desperately clung to something.

That's what her intuition told her. As an extinct demi-human species, he was probably produced by Alchemist's experiments. Unlike Kanaria, he was handed over to Inquisition rather than to Valhalla.

As they were same extinct fantastical organisms, she thought it was ironic.

This beast that took shape of a human looked only pathetic to her.

In his eyes there was just sadness and loss.

He longed for people, loved people, and then lost them. It didn't work out like in a picture book's story. Even if a beast found something important, it couldn't fully grasp it with its distorted fingertips since it spilled like water.

"So Kana... is the same huh..."

She lost Isuka and was losing Ikaruga.

After all, she was just a half-wood elf failure until the very end.

She couldn't free herself like the canary in the picture book.

Gou squinted and clenched his fist hard.

Kanaria quietly accepted death.

What crossed her mind, was her childhood and her mother's gently smiling face.

For some reason, there were two mothers.

"...no...Kana...doesn't want...that..."

She tried to deny the illusion. She tried to reject such possible happiness.

But this illusion was incredibly warm. Very awkward and clumsy, even though it was distorted, that illusion was surely the same as the canary in the picture book she has been given, in other words——

——A family, is what it might have been.

Embracing the illusion, Kanaria closed her eyes.

She didn't feel like resisting this comfort any longer.

"——Kana-san! Please do not move!"

The moment she heard a voice was simultaneous with her closing her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, grazing Kanaria's body something passed by at high speed.

A roar.

Gou's body who was holding her hair bent backwards strongly.

Next, there was another roar. Gou staggered and fell backwards. Kanaria's hair slipped out from his fingertips.

Kanaria noticed the support fire, regained sanity and looked at the person shooting.

Beside fallen Ikaruga, on her knees and holding the rifle was Usagi.

Usagi fired all the bullets she had and after placing the gun on top of the snow she took out something like a flask from her bosom pocket.

"What are you doing! Hurry up and attack! There's an opportunity now!"

".....b-but..."

"Suginami is alive! She won't kick the bucket with just this! I know best how well prepared this woman is!"

Alive... on what basis does she...? Kanaria thought so, but saw Usagi sprinkle to contents of the water bottle over Ikaruga's body and was stunned.

The water that came out of the flask was glowing in pale aqua color.

It was the water from the hostel's hot spring that had a recovery effect.

Looking closely, she saw the same flask in Ikaruga's bosom pocket. It has broken the moment she was hit by Gou and the content has spilled out. Kanaria was late to notice, but the blood that spilled after Ikaruga was hit didn't spread any further.

No way, she thought.

Right from the very beginning, Ikaruga has concealed a flask with hot spring water in her bosom?

Did that close the wound which opened with Gou's blow?

Without a doubt it was a coincidence, but assuming that Ikaruga was...

...alive?

"...ha...what's...with that...?"

Involuntarily, she let out a strange laughter.

Some happiness, relief and a little bit of anger swirled inside of Kanaria.

What was the strongest, was that little bit of anger.

The rage she felt towards Gou, embracing the anger, inquiring the reasons for embracing that anger, feeling empathy towards Gou for no reason, and recalling all these flashbacks earlier. What was that all?

The anger she felt was close to disappointment.

Kanaria grasped Lævateinn and stood up with a shadow on her face.

Gou stood up in the back and moved towards her growling, intending to blast her away with the cestus.

But Kanaria didn't turn around until just before it hit. Usagi was safe, Ikaruga was safe, and she too was alive.

There was no need to hurry. It wasn't late to accumulate her anger plenty.

This helplessness, this embarrassment, these feelings she didn't want to admit to have yet admitted and Ikaruga's feelings she didn't want to notice yet noticed.

Gathering it all together, Kanaria turned around and swung Lævateinn at the same time.

"THERE SHOULD BE A DAMN LIMIT TO BEING ALARMISTTTTTTTTTTTTT!"

Laying waste with the flames, Lævateinn 's blade clashed with Gou's fist.

"——!"

Gou caused an explosion with Ivan immediately, but against Kanaria, who has overcome a bunch of things that was nothing.

The technique Kanaria knew best.

First technique of Kusanagi Double-Edged style intended for use with heavy swords.

To stop this technique used when with a two-handed sword, it would require someone on level of Takeru or Orochi.

Rotating attack using centrifugal force and body weight easily blew Gou's body into the empty sky.

Magnolia's screams mixed with Kiseki's voice calling for her brother could no longer be heard.

The surroundings were being eroded by a red mass of meat, Hyakki Yakou devoured everything and continued to grow.

It looked like something blindly searching and progressing forward looking for the loved one.

The erosion rate was slow as compared to the incident a few months ago and possibly influenced by the dream she was being shown in the laboratory, the movement was also silly.

But it was without a doubt part of Kusanagi Kiseki.

The surroundings of Nagaru and Takeru were a already a mass of Hyakki Yakou. The reason they weren't swallowed up must have been thanks to Mistilteinn... thanks to Lapis.

The god-slaying sword was something even Hyakki Yakou was afraid of.

Magnolia's body was buried in the center of the mass of meat singing 『"Onii-chan."』.

Barely maintaining consciousness, Magnolia laughed powerlessly.

"...ha...haha, so that's my end huh... swallowed by your little sister going berserk... ahahaha, perfect death for garbage like me isn't it."

Takeru didn't respond. With his head hung down, he bit on his lower lip.

"Well, still, after becoming part of Hyakki Yakou I might fulfill my ambition of destroying the world. The moment those cells were implanted in me this fate was decided for me, right...?"

"....."

"Hey, Kusanagi... lemme tell ya... what Chairman wishes for... that person intends to destroy the world..."

Fusing with Hyakki Yakou and in a state where she no longer knew which one was her own body, Magnolia spoke.

"See, this world is broken... it seems like originally, magical power and magic didn't exist in this world... I don't really get what he was talking about, but if he desires destruction... then our interests are aligned..."

"....."

"This shitty world... I think it's best if it's damn destroyed... I wouldn't have to hate anyone... I'm fine with this world ending... no one will have to suffer any more..."

"....."

"Ya too have seen a distorted existence like your little sister... so ya understand, right?"

Wriggling Hyakki Yakou swallowed Magnolia.

As if she had already said her last words, she tried to close her eyes.

"——No, not at all."

Kneeling on the snow, Takeru spoke with a downcast gaze.

"I can't care less about the world. Whether it looks like shit, is filled with just despair, I don't care as long as I can protect what's important to me."

"....."

"But, if this world disappears, I'll lose what's important to me. That's why, in order to protect what's important to me I will save the world and anything else...! All of it, I'll save all of it!"

Takeru slowly raised his face and looked towards Magnolia with determination in his eyes.

"That's——the choice I made when I didn't kill Kiseki!"

At the same time as he said so, Takeru took the sword lying in the snow in his mouth.

He bit strongly on the handle and closed his eyes.

He has decided on what to do. There was only one way to overcome this situation.

《"Lapis."》

《"....."》

《"I won't let go of you this time. I definitely won't go wrong. Please, I don't want Kiseki to kill anyone else!"》

《"....."》

《"That's why——lend me the god-slaying power once again!"》

Lapis did not answer.

Takeru did not mind and sent his wish to her.

I want to save Kiseki. I want to live with my comrades. I want a world where people important to me can live in at peace.

I want to make those wishes come true together with you.

Takeru believed it was fine as long as their feelings alone were connected.

Inside of himself, he heard Lapis take a deep breath in.

《"..... 10 seconds. Any more than that and you really will..."》

Her voice implied she endured her emotions, but Takeru bowed to her in his mind, responding to it.

A part of the sword's handle deformed and a switch appeared.

At the same time as he exhaled, he clenched his teeth on the trigger.

——Twilight flames have swept down from the sword he held in his mouth.

The flames have spread as far as he could see and evaporated Hyakki Yakou which started to erode the world.

The armor has wrapped around Takeru body and also covered his head.

And the blade he was holding in his mouth has assimilated into the helmet in a fixed state.

《"The arm's regeneration will take time... are we going to do it like this?"》

《"Of course. Even without arms Double-Edged style's fangs won't be broken!"》

Takeru lowered his body and kicked off the ground with a strong momentum.

He ran forward through the snow.

The Hyakki Yakou that centered on Magnolia has build up a huge tower.

When Takeru approached in god hunting form, Hyakki Yakou's tentacles escaped terrified.

"Fuohh!"

Takeru leaped and swung the sword by rotating in the air.

Even without arms, he still had fangs.

As if to embody those words, Takeru cut the tentacles with the sword he held in his mouth.

Kusanagi Double-Edged style——Inugami.

It was conceived for battle where loss of both arms is assumed, a fighting technique for extreme conditions. Rather than with head movement, it was about slashing by using flexibility and body weight.

As if dancing, Takeru fluttered, fighting.

At the moment, he was a single fang. A fang of a raging beast.

Turning into a fang incarnate, Takeru slaughtered Hyakki Yakou until it was extinguished.

Running on top of dissipating cells of Hyakki Yakou, Takeru aimed for the top of the tower.

Towards the nucleus cell of Hyakki Yakou lodged in Magnolia's chest.

The blade which had 《Ragnarøkkr Enchant》 applied to it shone with twilight light.

Even if he destroys the nucleus cell, what was eroded so far won't disappear. He has to erase it all completely, waiting for Kiseki's rampage to settle down, there was no choice but to destroy the part that spread with Ragnarøkkr Enchant.

Five seconds remained. Only a part of the erosion has been slaughtered and he had to destroy the nucleus in the end.

《"...Host..."》

Lapis' anxious voice shook his brain.

We won't make it. That's what she wanted to say.

But he didn't stop. He couldn't afford to stop. At the very least until the fang is broken!

Slaughter, massacre, butcher it all!

"UUOOOOOOOOOoOoOOOoooo!"

《"Host... any more and...!"》

More than 10 seconds have already passed.

His vision was flickering. The location of his own consciousness has turned ambigious.

But the fang didn't break.

Putting more force into the blade in his mouth, Takeru delivered the final blow.

As if impaling it on its fangs, the god-slaying blade cut the Hyakki Yakou's nucleus cell.

He crashed onto the ground landing and got on his knees.

Behind him, the towering Hyakki Yakou was been engulfed in flames and has stopped moving.

Before long, it crumbled like ash, the tower of variant collapsed in flames.

Like snow flying on the wind, the demon tower disappeared completely. What remained was Magnolia's body, she lost consciousness.

Takeru visually confirmed that Magnolia was safe and breathing, and then tried to release his trigger from his mouth to cancel god hunting form.

——He couldn't let go——

No matter how much he tried, he couldn't let go of it.

Lapis' voice in his head was distant... no, she was too close to him and he could no longer tell if it was her or his own voice.

《"...nh, Host...!"》

Even though he was called, he didn't know whether it was his or Lapis' voice.

In the middle of scorching flames, Takeru reached out to the moon which peeked from behind the clouds.

It can't end in a place like this. It can't end yet.

And yet, his hand fell to the ground against his will.

He couldn't resist it.

Overcome by ruthless reality. Crushed by fate.

But, in fact——it was completely different those that.

It wasn't anything as half-assed as that.

"IT..'s NOt...over...YEt..."

In the end, Takeru looked up to the sky. In the middle of falling snow and twilight flames, his soul melted. He quietly closed his eyes.

As if leaving the ending to his own body.

Epilogue

After using Double-Edged style's secret art Ama-no-Habakiri and blowing up everything in a radius of two kilometers, Orochi pierced the ground with his sword and got down on one knee.

Gungnir's strengthening was already released.

Orochi continued to breathe roughly, covered with a huge amount of sweat.

In addition to the burden of using Ama-no-Habakiri, there was an even higher after-effect of using Gungnir.

Gungnir, Mother Goose has cancelled the sword form and returned back to human form.

She looked expressionlessly at Orochi's suffering.

"It seems like you, whose body is close to that of a human being, are having a hard time handling me."

".....haa...lay off."

Drawing an arc with his mouth, Orochi stopped breathing and stood up forcefully.

At the same time, there was a sound of something cracking in his leg.

Although Orochi's face distorted with pain only for a moment, Mother didn't miss it.

"You might want to stop moving. The substance of your right leg is nearing the end of its lifespan."

"...whether I move or not, it's all the same."

Orochi calmed his breath and erased the pain from his head.

And then, he looked around at the area everything evaporated in.

"Haunted got swallowed up by it."

"Yes. It would be good if he actually died."

"Good grief, I don't think we can count on that."

Although he smiled wryly, there was darkness in his eyes.

"...this much isn't enough to kill that guy."

"Indeed. To kill him you will have to complete the 《Deification》. And even if you obliterate him with it, you will face the same fate as well."

"I'm aware of that. I have no intention of pulling out at this point."

Orochi answered in an aloof manner and begun to move with a firm gait.

Mother followed after him, two people walked through the devastated land.

Gungnir's deification was different from Mistilteinn's witch hunter form. Even if Gungnir was a Sacred Treasure used by a god, it wasn't a god-slaying Sacred Treasure.

And as the 'deification' name suggests, the person using it becomes an existence equivalent to a god. Of course if it's performed, a human won't be able to withstand it. Rather than requiring the strength of soul, deification needs excessively high physical specs.

Still, Orochi turned into a god without any hesitation to confront Sougetsu this time. Even though he had only few seconds, if it was to kill that man, Orochi didn't hesitate.

"Is what you told him true?"

"What is?"

"...Kusanagi Takeru and Mistilteinn. That you have hopes related to their future. It is true that the assimilation of soul will progress as their bond deepens."

"....."

"I know that you despise Twilight Types. You won't fully accept me. But that is why we were able to build up an ideal relationship as a Sacred Treasure and its user."

Mother spoke quietly and stared at Orochi from his side.

"Is there any benefit for you in them becoming a complete god-hunter? It might end as a failure."

In response to Mother's question, he made a meaningful smile.

"Was there a precedent of a person becoming a complete god hunter in the past?"

"No. Mistilteinn who had high potential to succeed has failed in the past, so there's no precedent."

"Then we've no idea what might happen do we. Same for me and you, until the very end we won't know what will happen if we're complete as a deity. Who knows in what form will they end up."

Hearing those irresponsible words, Mother displayed a dissatisfied look.

Orochi stared into the distance and continued in a quiet voice.

"You see, I've been thinking. Rather than you and I who don't acknowledge each other, he and Mistilteinn who acknowledge each other might save the world even if they don't fuse with each other."

"...acknowledging each other leads to fusion. That's just wishful thinking without any basis, in the first place, the existence of a god hunter is the biggest obstacle for our objective."

"Perhaps. But see, I want my disciple to choose the path to follow on his own, that's why."

"I cannot comprehend that."

"I'd guess you wouldn't."

Orochi narrowed his eyes and laughed quietly. The haori draped over his shoulders fluttered like a cloak.

"In any case, it changes nothing when it comes to what I have to do. Just as you wish for, I will have this body and soul undergo deification."

"....."

"But after that——make sure that you, who becomes this world's god fulfill your promise."

Mother who was slightly behind him started walking faster and lined up next to him.

"I acknowledge. After I'm reformed in a new shape in this world, I will make it so that your elder sister never died."

The corners of his lips distorted as he heard Mother's reply, Orochi glared towards the front.

"Then, it's war. Not like I wanted it, but since it happened it can't be helped. Let's end this with the minimum amount of sacrifices."

"Acknowledged. We shall destroy those who stand in our way and reach out to those asking for salvation."

"....."

"Let's start the war, Host."

In response to Mother's words, Orochi said.

"——Yeah, let's try remakin' this world all right."

And stating their own ambition, they lit the flames starting the second Witch Hunt War.

* * *

What Ouka and Mari saw when they rushed to rejoin with their comrades after the battle with Kagerou finished, was a sight beyond all expectations.

In the middle of down-pouring white crystals, there were two different figures.

"...Host...! I beg you... please wake up... please open your eyes...!"

Unmoving Takeru who fell on top of the snow and the figure of Lapis who embraced him.

Lapis had a painful expression and shook Takeru with tears in her eyes.

Please wake up. I beg you.

Baring her emotions, she kept on speaking those words.

Just like the last moments of her past contractor, Mikoto——

"...I'm sorryy...I'm sorry...!"

Ouka and Mari could only stare at this scene, astonished.

What they understood, was that some kind of outrageous incident had taken place.

But they didn't know how serious a crisis has come from that event.

However,

"...I'm sorry..."

Seeing the weeping Lapis, anxiety appeared in the back of their minds.

Her voice that was being drowned out in the falling snow had resounded in Ouka's and Mari's head time after time again.

Afterwords

No matter how I look at it, MVP this time is the hostel.

And so, been a while. It's Yanagimi Touki.

This time I dreamed of a journey, remodelled Small Fry Platoon's military vehicle and sent them on a journey to the mountains of Tohoku.

Outside of the tunnel there's a country of snow... a tempting scene for summertime, hot springs, hostel.

Meetings with people in a quiet village and winter love romance——

——*chirr* *chirr* *chirr*! *chirr* *chirr* *chirr* (cicada sounds).

Somehow, I feel like I did something similar before.

This volume's release is in August, right. Where did my sense of seasons go.

The summer is in full swing, yet the work is in the middle of winter, I think that reading this volume 8 might cool you off.

...also, there's a character that seems like it has come out of a horror movie.

Now then, AntiMagic Academy is already at the 8th volume. I hope you enjoyed it.

Last volume was quite oppressive, so I thought of finishing lighter this time. Whether it's the platoon members, readers, or the author, I think we all need some healing at times.

Speaking of which, third, fifth and seventh volumes which tell heavy stories are separated by a volume. It's a coincidence though.

Story-wise it didn't advance much in this volume, but the aim was to expand on each character's feelings and clarify their current situation. The amount of comrades (?) increased with Kanaria and Nagaru, and I have dug a bit deeper into them.

And despite the platoon members being on a journey, I was able to draw a disturbing development among the adults.

Hey, it's adults.. In the current situation the average age of the adult characters is 'unknown'. Personally, I had fun making up Orochi and Mother's exchange with Haunted.

As for the combat, I tried challenging a reckless car chase, pulled out three enemies at once, and even though I said 'healing' it ended up with guns blazing.

And what you were awaiting. Even if you weren't, I have awaited it.

HOT ・SPRINGS ・TIME!

Indeed, speaking of hot springs time!

"Yahooo! It's boobies! Both small chests and big boobs of all shapes and sizes!"

.....

"Steam, you bastard."

This.

Outright unnatural steam. Steam moving like a living organism to protect boobies.

There's no way a small amount of H2O could hide the appearance of wonderful boobies.

——Or so one could think.

In fact, this steam bastard has been disturbing my writing of the 8th volume.

But, I want you to wait for a bit.

I want those who think of steam negatively to rethink it a little.

What is it that makes gravure magazines good?

It depends on the personal thoughts, but I think it's the fact that 'Important places are hidden by the cloth". I think its wonderful how that stimulates one's imagination.

Why does Venus de Milo sculpture have a historical value and attracts a lot of people? Why aren't those missing arms restored?

I think there is a technical aspect to it, but also, it's because people who look at it imagine it with beautiful arms, it might be because people think the 'imagined arms' have a great worth.

Did you ever experience getting to open a gift box excited and being disappointed?

How about going to a cinema after seeing an interesting movie trailer, yet it was completely below your expectations? What I mean, is that kind of thing.

Doesn't steam——make it pervy instead?

Those of you who don't hate steam.

Isn't it fine to love steam?

Steam isn't hiding the wonderfulness of boobs from us.

Imagination provides us with hard to obtain eros.

To speak, it protects our romance from the right straight that is reality.

That too, is in the end just a natural phenomenon.

It's not a solid object like cloth or leaves, but a modest existence made of gas and liquid.

Isn't it innocent. Isn't it lovely.

Mr. Steam... thank you.

You always appear unable to read the mood and end up being abused, I'm sorry.

Rather, it's the opposite. You read the mood, actually, you create the mood.

I accept you. I respect you for making the wonderful boobies even more attractive.

...but, well.

Your relative, is absolutely unacceptable.

I mean, the one who appears without any artistic quality.

While I can understand the existence of mr. Steam in that place, he cuts in places they absolutely shouldn't be in... yes, I mean him.

Mysterious light——you bastard are so damn far-fetched it's impossible for me to ever forgive you.

Ahh, somehow, this time I feel like the worst and disgusting afterword has come out. See, this time, there's a lot of pages for me to use on afterword so it can't be helped.

The 9th volume will probably start from right after they arrived in the home of dissidents.

What happened to Takeru. What's the actual situation of dissidents. What about second Witch Hunt War.

And the disturbing movements of the Alchemist——! That's how it's supposed to feel like.

I can't promise it'll go according to the plan, but I would be really really glad if you read the ninth volume! It's still continuing and going strong〜!

And the acknowledgements.

The new person in charge who supports me despite being busy, K-sama. The previous in-charge I'm in debt to for being take care of since the launch, S-sama.

The one who draws perfectly beautiful illustrations despite having to make do with plain clothes Kippu-sensei. Hanao Sutarou-sensei who drew a wonderful comic version of the work.

Various people who made PV and CM, dragon magazine short story, plan the animation and various people from Fujimi Shoubou I was supported by.

And finally, all of you who have taken this book in your hands, you have my heartfelt thanks.

Now then, let's meet again in volume nine!

Look forward to it!

Yanagimi Touki